A *Frisky Fairy Tale*

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

NIKKI DEAN

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FRISKY FAIRY TALES BOOK 1

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Afterword

This book is dedicated to my sister, Emma Dean. I never would have been able to accomplish this without your help, support and feedback. You're my best friend.
(Shameless sister plug here - Check out her space opera reverse harem series and her paranormal shifter reverse harem series on Amazon!)

CHAPTER 1

Belle shuddered as the frigid wind sliced through her thin cloak, tearing a gasp from her throat. Desperate, she grit her teeth and kept riding, unwilling to abandon her father to the elements.

He had come out to gather herbs to treat his constant cough, but hadn't made it home before an unseasonably late blizzard swept through the countryside two days ago.

Driven half-mad by worry, Belle had finally accepted that the cold snap was sticking around, and, against her neighbor's wishes, took off to find him.

That had been yesterday.

Her horse, Phoebe, tugged on the reins as she lowered her head. Belle gave her some slack and then hunched over, trying to regain some of the meager shelter the animal's large neck had provided from the wind.

It didn't work.

"Come on, girl, just a little farther. I'm sure we'll find the road just up ahead," Belle said through chattering teeth, urging the horse to keep moving. "We'll be out of these woods soon."

She was lying. Phoebe knew it.

They trudged through the trees in the fading twilight. A wolf howled in the distance and Phoebe jerked her head up, nostrils flaring in alarm. A second one howled its reply, closer.

Belle patted the horse's neck, trying to soothe her. "Now, now, I'm sure it's just a farmer's dog. Nothing to be afraid of."

Phoebe tossed her mane and snorted.

"I know. Let's just hurry, shall we?"

The horse whinnied softly and stepped a little quicker. Belle grimaced as she brought out the remains of her torch.

"Damned thing. Just hold steady, Phoebe. I'll get this going and we can have a little more light."

Her hands nearly frozen, Belle fumbled with the flint contraption that Papa had made for her, nearly dropping it. She swore in frustration.

A fallen limb cracked in the brush. Something large growled at them.

Phoebe bolted. Belle screamed and clung to the saddle, desperately trying to keep her seat. The horse's hooves thundered against the ground as she ran, and the sound was joined by the howling of wolves taking up the chase. Belle looked back to see a large, hulking shape in pursuit, but it was like nothing she had ever seen before. It ran on all fours, but its shoulders were easily as tall as Phoebe's and small horns glinted on its forehead. Thick, shaggy fur covered its bulky frame and it roared at them in anger.

Belle hurled her torch at it. It swerved, easily dodging the little stick, then snapped at Phoebe's hooves. Drool flew from its teeth as it roared again, spurring Phoebe on.

They hurtled through the trees, branches clawing at Belle's cloak and dress as they rushed by.

"Faster, Phoebe! Faster!"

The beast was gaining on them.

Belle whirled back around just in time to see a branch hanging in their way. She ducked, wrenching the reins to the side. Phoebe stumbled and Belle lost her seat, screaming as she sailed through the air.

She hit something soft and bounced, tumbling to the snow-covered ground. Her head struck a rock and everything went black.

The beast circled Belle's limp body, breathing plumes of steam as he inspected her. The horse had kept going, abandoning her mistress. He absently rubbed the spot on his chest where the girl had ricocheted off of him.

"What are you doing here?" he growled. Belle didn't move.

He shoved at her shoulder, forcing her to roll over. The cloak fell away from her face and he pulled up short, staring. It had been a long time since

he had seen a woman, much less one that wasn't screaming at the sight of him.

Strands of her brown hair had loosened from her braid and fell around her face. Long eyelashes formed fans across her sharp cheekbones, and her pink lips were pale with cold. He growled in annoyance as he contemplated what to do with her.

I could always just leave her here. I'm sure she would prefer that over coming with me. A wolf growled nearby. *Then again, maybe not.*

He whirled, batting away the offending animal as it sprang on them. He snarled at it, baring his teeth. It hunched low and growled back, angry but unwilling to attack without its pack. Beast attacked first, tearing into its vulnerable neck.

He left it bleeding, but alive, in the snow.

Hefting Belle over his shoulder, he ran. The wolves converged on their fallen member before taking up the chase, quickly making up ground. The beast shifted Belle higher, then dropped to all fours and ran, easily outpacing the pack.

He reached the castle walls and vaulted over with one quick leap. Belle moaned as they landed, jostled back to consciousness. She lifted her head just as the monstrous creature dumped her onto the ground in a snow-covered courtyard. The wolves jumped at the wall, barking in fury.

The beast rose to his hind legs beside her and howled again, taunting them.

Belle screamed in terror. *Oh god, oh god, oh god, what is that* ***thing****?!*

His massive head swiveled her way, small horns glinting in the semi-darkness.

She shrank back, desperately wishing she could just blend into the snow. He didn't move, and they stared at each other for a moment.

A mane draped over his wide shoulders, which tapered to a deep chest and lean hips. His front arms were like those of a heavily muscled man's, except for the paws, complete with massive claws. His hind legs were shaped more like a wolf's, tapering down to more paws where human feet should have been. His cat-like tail swept the snow behind him and he wore a pair of filthy breeches.

Another wolf howled on the other side of the wall, breaking the trance. Belle flinched.

The beast pounced. She fell back, wincing in fear as one giant paw landed on either side of her head. He snarled down at her, his lips curling back to reveal canines very similar to the wolves' teeth.

"Please, don't ..." Belle struggled to get the words out.

The Beast began to relax, his face shifting from a snarl to a mere scowl.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Her jaw dropped open. Shock gave her voice back. "You ... you can speak?"

He huffed in her face, flooding it with white plumes of steam.

"I'm - I'm sorry. I just - " she broke off, unable to continue.

He snorted again, but didn't hurt her. The wolves yipped in delight and Phoebe neighed loudly from somewhere outside of the wall. Belle lurched upright in panic, a little of her fear overridden by the certainty that her friend was about to be eaten alive.

"My horse! I have to help her!" She shoved the beast away as she jumped to her feet. She stumbled, her legs already numb with cold. "Where's the gate?"

"You would go back out there with the wolves? Just for a horse?"

Belle found it easier to respond if she just didn't look at him again. "She's more than just *a* horse. She's mine. She's my friend. I can't just leave her out there to be eaten alive."

"It would do her no good if you are eaten, yourself."

Belle froze in her tracks, fear for her life threatening to overtake her again. "Is that a threat?"

He growled as he circled around her, the fur raising on his back. "I haven't decided."

This must be a dream, she thought as she watched him. *There's no way this is real. Who knows, maybe the wolves have already killed us, and this creature is a ghost from beyond.*

"What are you?" The words flew from her mouth before she thought better of it.

He snarled at her, but didn't say anything.

The wolves howled once more, reminding her that Phoebe's life was also still in danger. *Real or not, those wolves sound hungry. I can't let them have her, but what can I do from here? I can't even get out of the courtyard. But he can.*

"Well, would you please save Phoebe while you decide if you're going to have us for dinner? I'm going to need her if you let us leave, and I'd rather not listen to my friend get eaten alive." *Please don't kill me.* She squeezed her eyes shut as he circled her once more.

The beast almost laughed. *It's been a long time since anyone has spoken to me like that,* he thought. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

Phoebe neighed again. Belle began to run along the wall, frantic to help. The beast kept pace with her easily.

"I am. But I'm more afraid for Phoebe. You only *might* devour us, but the wolves surely will."

He shook his massive head, sending snow flurries flying. "I'll get her. Stay here." He leaped over the wall.

"Don't eat her!" Belle called after him. "What on earth have I gotten us into?" she wondered aloud, struggling to understand what was happening. *What is that creature? And why can he talk, like a human being?*

She shuddered as his snarling face flashed into her mind. *If he can talk, maybe he can be reasoned with. Maybe we can get out of this alive, after all.* It was a meager hope, but she grabbed onto it with both hands.

Everything was quieter on the other side of the wall. The wolves could still be heard, snarling and barking, farther back in the woods, but Belle didn't hear Phoebe anymore.

Dread filled her heart at the thought of her friend's fate. "Maybe everything's okay. Maybe that *thing* got to her in time, and she's safe inside the wall." She refused to acknowledge how ridiculous she sounded, even to herself.

"I need to get inside." Nearly frozen, Belle finally looked around the courtyard without distraction. The stone statues, once grand, were crumbling under the relentless onslaught of vines growing over them, their tiny fingers winding through cracks and crevices. A frigid wind cut through the yard and she shivered almost violently. *It will do no good to freeze to death while I wait. Hopefully he'll bring her to the castle.* She made her way to its shelter.

The heavy door creaked loudly as Belle pushed it open to find a parlor inside. Faint embers glowed in the nearby fireplace and she hurried over to feed them with the stack of dry kindling nearby. Soon a blazing fire lit the room and she huddled in front of it, soaking in the warmth.

I hope Phoebe is all right. She will probably be thirsty, but I have no idea where the stables are. Or if they're even still standing. Tears filled Belle's eyes. *Or if Phoebe's still standing either.*

"I can't think like that. She's fine. She has to be." Belle wiped the tears from her eyes and glanced around the room, determined to do something useful to prepare for her horse's arrival. Instead she just stood there in shock, raising her eyebrows at the disarray.

Chairs were broken and tables split in half. Stuffing spilled from cushions and pillows strewn about the room. A broken mirror hung haphazardly above the fireplace. A chair leg lay among the shards below it.

Belle picked the chair leg up and wrapped a strip of fabric around the end, then set it aflame. "I need a bowl, and a broom, it looks like," she murmured to herself. Her hands shook. "A good rag wouldn't hurt either."

Holding her makeshift torch high, she carefully made her way across the room to the next doorway. A grand hall stretched out before her, complete with two massive staircases curving upward in the gloom. She squinted at them, trying to see where they led. Her flickering torch illuminated nothing but more shadows, and she shivered at the thought of the beast hiding in them. An aging chandelier dangled from the ceiling on fraying ropes.

Belle spotted another hallway and she hurried down it, barely glancing at the shredded portraits that hung on the walls.

The hallway ended in a large kitchen that was in slightly better shape than the great room or parlor. Broken dishes covered the floor and a thick layer of dust blanketed the countertops, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage.

"A broom, a broom, where would I find a broom in this mess?" Belle muttered to herself. "I need to clear a spot before he brings Phoebe in. *If* he brings her, that is." She eventually found a broom and a wooden bowl that remained intact, then hurried back to the parlor with them. Ducking out of the main door, she quickly filled the bowl with snow, then set it near the fire.

Satisfied that it would be enough for she and Phoebe when it melted, Belle got started cleaning. She dragged the larger pieces of broken furniture over to keep the fire going with and swept the area clear of

broken glass. The stone floor was freezing, so she pulled several giant rugs over, stacking them to make a pallet big enough for her and the horse.

I wonder where they are? I hope he didn't eat her after all. Maybe I should check again ...

Snow swirled in the courtyard as she anxiously peeked out the door. It had begun coming down again, and the incessant wind wasn't making matters any better.

She heard scraping behind her and whirled around. The room was empty, but steam rose from a pot of tea on a tray near the fire. A fresh, clean rug covered the pallet she had pulled together, and pillows were resting on one end. Several blankets lay folded beneath them.

"Hello? Is someone there?" Belle called out.

The door slammed against the wall beside her and the beast prowled inside, alone. He shook, sending melted snow and flurries everywhere.

"Where is Phoebe?" Belle demanded before she thought better of it. "Is she all right?"

The beast turned toward her and rose onto his hind legs, snarling at her impudence. She shrank back, her mouth suddenly going dry.

"Is she ...?" Belle managed to whisper.

The beast growled as he marched past her. "I put her in the stables."

Belle sagged against the wall in relief. *I have to see her. I need to make sure she's okay.* "Please, can I see her?"

"I said she's in the stables!" the monster retorted, glaring over his shoulder.

But... Belle looked around the great room in dismay, trying to imagine how an outbuilding must look if the main house was so destroyed. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "Can you please bring her here instead? I made her a bed and got some water," she said as she gestured toward the bowl by the fireplace. "And I think your servants left you a pot of tea."

The beast looked at her for a moment, then threw back his head with an odd chuffing noise. Belle realized he must be laughing at her. Indignation, and exhaustion, kept her talking before she thought better of it.

"What exactly was funny about that?" she demanded.

He picked up one of the delicate tea cups and crushed it in his palm. "They should have brought a bowl if it was for me."

He dropped the shards in front of the tray. Belle sighed before she could stop herself, overwhelmed with the whole situation.

The beast snarled at her disapproval, then grew incredulous as she picked up the broom, sweeping the pieces of china into the pile of other broken things nearby.

"What are you doing?" he asked. *Is she insane? It would explain why she hasn't run screaming for the gate yet. Then again, I suppose the starving wolves on the other side might have something to do with that.*

"I just cleaned this area, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't break anything else for the time being. I need to put my shoes in front of the hearth to dry and don't want to cut myself." She heard herself speaking as though from far away, like the logical explanation couldn't possibly be coming from her lips. She put the broom back into a corner. "Now, my horse, if you don't mind." *What am I doing? Have I lost my mind completely? I must have a death wish, speaking to him like that.*

"You expect me to let a horse sleep in my home?"

"It looks like you've already been letting pigs do so," Belle muttered under her breath. What was left of her sanity threw its hands up in defeat.

"What did you just say?!" the beast roared at her.

She cringed back, color flaming up her cheeks. "Nothing, sir. Just that I don't see why not. She's probably cold, and afraid. She needs me." Belle looked up at the beast's towering form. "And - and I need her," she finished.

"Are you afraid of me, little girl?"

What kind of question is that? Belle nodded. "Of course. But that doesn't mean that I'll let my horse freeze to death if I can help it."

"She'll be fine where she is. No one is going to freeze," the beast snarled. "Now, come along. I'll show you to your room."

"No." Desperation filled her heart. *She's dead, isn't she? That's why he won't let me see her.* Tears filled her eyes again.

"What?!" He roared again, blowing her hair back from her face.

Belle twisted her hands into her skirt behind her back, but didn't back away. "No. Not without making sure Phoebe is all right."

He roared again, making her ears ring. She didn't move, didn't even breathe in the face of his wrath. She couldn't help the tears that slid down her cheeks, and he stared at them.

Something moved in the hallway behind them, but didn't come into the open.

"Go get her horse," he finally snarled.

Belle heaved a sigh of relief as she sank to her pallet, heart pounding in terror. The monster dropped back to all fours and prowled around her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

He took a deep breath, then snapped his teeth together. "I can smell it, you know. Your fear."

Belle stayed silent.

"Why is this animal so important to you, even though you are so terrified? Do you think she will save you, somehow?" He lowered his head so that it was level with hers. She couldn't help but stare at his teeth as he asked, "Do you think that I couldn't catch you if you tried to ride her away?"

Swallowing hard, Belle shook her head.

"Then why?"

"Because I love her, and she needs me," Belle whispered back.

The beast snorted as he pulled back, puzzlement in his eyes. Someone rapped on the door and he turned, stalking to it. He opened the portal to reveal Phoebe standing there alone, her reins wrapped around a coat rack on the doorstep. She whinnied, her eyes rolling in fear of the beast.

Belle ran to her.

Throwing her arms around the horse's neck, Belle buried her face against her friend as she cried with relief. Phoebe pawed at the ground, nodding her large head against Belle's back.

Snow swirled through the open doorway, plastering Belle's wet skirts against her legs.

"I'm so sorry, girl. Let's get you inside, out of the cold." She pulled the reins free from the coat rack they were tied to and led Phoebe inside.

The monster backed into a shadow so that Phoebe couldn't see him. Belle frowned as an unexpected pang of gratitude shot through her. *I suppose I should thank him. He really did save our lives.*

Her goodwill quickly faded as she took stock of her horse. Although physically unharmed, she was still soaking wet from sweat and melted snow. Her saddle was still strapped onto her back, having been jolted sideways during their frantic run for their lives.

Belle took a deep breath, trying to calm down. *I'm being irrational. Phoebe's alive, and perfectly fine. That's what counts.* "I know it's not home, and not what you're used to, but it's just for tonight," Belle murmured as she took off Phoebe's saddle. "We'll find Papa tomorrow."

"Come. A servant can handle that," the beast ordered.

"Like your stable hand should have already?" Belle snapped back. "She should have already had this taken off and been rubbed dry. She's freezing." Belle shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"This is my home, and you will do as I say!" he bellowed.

Phoebe screamed in fright and reared back, kicking out with her front legs. The beast growled again as one of her hooves narrowly missed Belle's head.

"Be quiet! You're scaring her!" Belle grabbed at Phoebe's mane and held on tight. The horse reared back again, dragging her along, then pranced in a circle when Belle refused to let go.

They struggled together for a moment until Phoebe calmed enough to stand still, butting her head into Belle's chest. Belle locked eyes with the beast as she whispered into the horse's ears and rubbed her neck, comforting her while she stood twitching before the fire.

The beast watched them for a moment, then turned, leaving the room.

Belle sagged against Phoebe in relief, whispering a short prayer of thanks against the animal's mane. *I should have at least thanked him, though,* she thought with a little remorse. *If only he weren't so impossible. He's so demanding that I'd almost think he was human.* She shook her head. *But that's clearly not the case. I wonder what he is? Some fae creature I've never heard of, I suppose.*

"Let's get you settled in, all right?" Belle said to Phoebe after a moment. She straightened and found that a stack of thick cloth napkins had appeared beside the pot of tea. She frowned at them as she poured herself a cup, then shrugged and picked one of the napkins up.

"I suppose this will have to do," she said as she began to wipe down the horse's body. "It's better than nothing."

hy is she so devoted to that animal? the beast wondered, watching them. He had doubled back and crouched in the shadows, out of sight. *She didn't know that I wouldn't eat her for her impudence.*

He kept watching, mesmerized by the rhythmic stroking of Belle's hands over the horse's sides. A faint longing crept through him and he shook his coat, disgusted. *Of course she wouldn't ever touch me like that. Don't be foolish.*

Still, he could almost picture himself in there with her, standing in the horse's place. Feeling her soft hands roaming over his fur. Petting him. *As though I were some sort of lapdog.* He bared his teeth at the thought.

"Sire?" a multi-armed candelabra bowed when he looked at it. "Our, ahh, other guest seems to be in need of medical attention."

The beast rose silently to his feet and padded through the great room to another hallway. The candelabra following, hopping along silently. They paused in front of a bedroom door.

"Have Mrs. Ambly handle it. The snow is too thick to just make him leave," Beast growled. He continued on without another word.

"I, ah, I mean we, we tried that already, sire." The candelabra rubbed two of its arms together before it, as though wringing its hands.

Beast snarled, but didn't turn back.

"Well, all right then."

~

Belle looked over, distracted by a sound. She stared, aghast, as the tea cart seemed to be rolling away on its own.

"Is ... Is someone there?" she asked for the second time that night. Her voice trembled. "Whoever you are, come out right now!"

The cart stopped rolling.

"Please, miss, don't be afraid. No one is going to hurt you."

"Who said that?" Belle demanded. She recoiled as a sudden thought came to her. "Are you ... are you a ghost?"

The tea cart shook, its cups and saucers tinkling together as someone laughed. "No, dear, I'm not a ghost. Although I can see why you might think that." The cart rolled back towards the fire. "I'm right here on the tray."

Belle leaned closer. "I don't see anyone."

The teapot jiggled. Belle picked it up, determined to see how it was moving. *Are there strings attached to it?*

"Hello, dear," the pot said. "I'm Mrs. Ambly. I'm delighted that you came to stay with us this evening."

Belle gave a little shriek of frightened surprise and nearly dropped the pot. She briefly juggled with it, inadvertently tossing it from hand to hand before it landed heavily on the pile of napkins still on the cart.

"I'm so sorry!" Belle exclaimed. "Are you all right?" *I'm talking to a teapot. I've lost my mind for sure.*

Mrs. Ambly shook herself, her lid rattling against her round, silver body. "Yes, lamb. I'm fine. It will take a lot more than that to make a dent in this old lady," she said. A face seemed to be molded into the side of the pot, and it smiled at her as it spoke.

Belle sank to the floor beside the cart. Phoebe whinnied anxiously, nosing against her mistress's back as if to make sure she was all right.

"How ... How is this possible?" Belle murmured. "What kind of magic is this?"

The door opened behind her, and the coat rack walked in, giving a crab-like appearance as its large body scuttled about on four short legs. Belle stared with fascinated apprehension.

"Is everything here alive?" she asked.

"Well, not everything," Mrs. Ambly replied. "At least, not anymore." She cast a meaningful glance around the room.

Belle followed her gaze, lingering on the broken chairs, tables and lamps. "Oh my goodness. Were they alive as well? And he destroyed them anyway?"

"Not really. It's complicated, dear." The pot laughed at Belle's traumatized expression, then quickly reassured her, "Each soul that was in these things just moved on to another object. We can't really die like this."

"But how? You have souls?"

Mrs. Ambly nodded vigorously, her whole body shaking. "Of course. We were people once, too."

"People? Human people? But why are you a teapot now?" She paused, wrinkling her brow as she thought. "Did that monster used to be human, too?"

Clucking in reproach, the tea cart began to roll down the hallway again. "He's not a monster, my dear. I can explain some parts of our story, but the rest are the Master's to tell. That's not really why I came to speak with you, though. If you'd come with me, please, there is someone here that could use your help."

Belle glanced at Phoebe, who was settled on her rug, then followed the cart out of the room. The strange, disconnected feeling had come back, as though none of this could possibly be real. "My help? Why?"

"We have another guest, but he seems to be ill and there's only so much that I can do."

Belle stopped in her tracks, hope blossoming in her chest. "Another guest? A man? Is he older, about fifty or so? Gray hair, red shirt, a funny little scar on his eyebrow?"

Mrs. Ambly stopped to look back at her. "Why, yes, that all sounds about right. How did you know?"

Belle rushed past her, running down the hallway. "That's my father! I've been out looking for him!" She wrenched open the first door that she came it. The room was empty. "Please, where is he?"

Mrs. Ambly sped up on her cart. "Right this way! I'm afraid to say he has a cough, and I'm not sure that we can help him here. We don't exactly get many guests, you know."

Belle followed the cart down another hallway, then to a bedroom door. She pushed it open and rushed inside.

Her father lay on a settee before the fire, shivering beneath a blanket.

"Papa!" Rushing to his side, she placed the back of her hand against his forehead. He was burning up.

"Papa, can you hear me?" she demanded, grabbing his shoulders. His eyes cracked open and he gave a little smile.

"Belle? Belle, is that you? What are you doing here?"

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "I've come to rescue you, Papa. You're very sick, and you've been gone for days."

"Has it been that long already?"

She nodded. "I've been so worried about you."

He feebly patted her hand. "I'm sorry, love. I got lost, and ended up here." He suddenly sat up and turned away to cough, his whole body seizing up. He lay back and drew the blanket up around his chin, miserable once more. "I'll be fine, just you wait and see."

"Of course you will, Papa," Belle said sadly. *He's never been this bad before.* She turned to the tea cart waiting near the doorway. A chair shifted on its legs nearby.

"Do you have anything we could give him for his cough? Some ginger and cinnamon tea perhaps? With honey?"

Mrs. Ambly tilted her pot to the side as though thinking. "We might." She hopped over to the edge of the cart. "Felicity, please have Cookie check the spice rack and cellar."

The chair's tall back bobbled as though nodding, then it hurried from the room.

"There now, we will have something shortly. Is there anything else you would like?"

Belle looked around. The fire was dying down and the room clearly hadn't been used in quite some time. She hurriedly stripped the bed, coughing through clouds of dust, then dumped the load outside the door.

"Fresh sheets and blankets, if you have them," Belle said, waving her hands in the air. "Sleeping in a pile of dust would only make his cough worse. I can start sweeping up if you'll bring me the broom, and we are going to need a lot more firewood to keep him from catching a chill. I'll also need some fresh snow and linen strips to help with his fever."

Mrs. Ambly nodded again and began to roll out of the room.

"Please have someone check on my horse, as well," Belle called after her. Mrs. Ambly didn't respond.

Belle turned to survey the room. It would be presentable after a good cleaning, but would take some time. A knock sounded at the door and she hurried over, throwing it open. A dozen or so household items stood in the hallway, each armed with a broom or dust rag. Mrs. Ambly's tea cart pulled up the rear, loaded down with the fresh linens that Belle had requested.

"The tea will be ready soon, and I managed to find some peppermint paste as well," the pot said as the other servants began to clean. "If you'll just mix a little water in with it, it will be fine again. Spread it out on your father's chest to open his airways and help with his breathing."

Belle clutched the tiny silver ointment pot to her chest a moment before hurrying to her sleeping father. "Thank you for all of your help."

"Don't worry about it, dear. It's the least we could do. I apologize that I didn't think of it sooner."

"Sooner?" Belle looked up in consternation. "How long has he been here?"

Everyone froze a moment, then went back to cleaning. The floor was spotless within moments.

"How. Long?" Belle repeated slowly. Forcefully.

"About two days, miss," the chair answered. Mrs. Ambly glared at it.

"Two days?" Belle repeated. "Two days that he's been lying here in a chilly room, getting worse and worse? Has he eaten anything, or drank anything since he's been here?" she demanded. "Why has he been treated this way?"

The servants shrank back, and a growl resonated down the hallway. Belle stormed to the door and threw it open.

"Well, he drank a spot of tea when he first arrived," Mrs. Ambly said with a tremble. "Please, miss, you mustn't ..."

"My Lord Monster, can you please come in here a moment?" Belle all but yelled. Sarcasm dripped from her words. "I have a few questions about your other *guest*."

The growl grew louder, vibrating through her chest as the beast stalked down the hall. It ended abruptly as he snapped his teeth together before her.

"Why hasn't my father been properly taken care of?" Belle demanded without preamble. "He would have died here if I hadn't come along!"

"You mean, if I hadn't saved you? Like I saved him?" The hair on his back rose in anger.

She paused a moment. "You saved him from the wolves as well?"

He shook. "No, he managed to make it into the castle on his own."

She shook her head at him. "Then you didn't exactly save him, now did you?"

"I did when I allowed him to stay instead of killing him for his thievery!"

Belle snorted. "My father is no thief. And sparing someone's life isn't the same thing as saving them!"

"Isn't it? I could have eaten him if I had wished," the beast growled at her. Fear trickled into the anger and exhaustion that was keeping her on her feet. Her father moaned on the settee behind them and Belle went to his side.

"Saving someone is when you intervene on their behalf," she bit out. "Sparing them from your own actions is not quite the same thing. You don't get to pretend that you've done something noble when all you did was use a little self-control."

The beast snarled at her in fury. Belle noticed that the other living things had somehow vacated the room, abandoning her to his temper.

"You should have told your servants to take better care of him."

He roared. The old man lurched upright, flailing about in his terror. Belle rushed over and wrapped her arms around him.

"Shush, Papa, it's all right. I'm here to take care of you now. Everything will be fine," she comforted. "Nothing will hurt you."

"Belle! You have to leave! There is a beast in the castle!"

She sighed as she rolled her eyes. "Yes, Papa, I've met him. Don't worry, he won't hurt you."

"But, Belle, you can't let him catch you or he'll keep you as a prisoner too! You have to run, Belle ..." He drifted back to sleep, pulled under by his fever.

Belle pointed at the door to the adjoining room and marched through it. She stood silently as she waited for the beast to come through, then shut it gently behind them. This room wasn't as filthy as the last, with fresh sheets on the bed and a fire already in the hearth. Belle made a mental note to thank the housekeeper later.

"Prisoner?" She raised an eyebrow at the beast. "You told him that he's your prisoner?"

"He owes me for the sugar bowl that he tried to steal, and the provisions that he has used," the beast snarled back. The carpet began to shred under his claws as he paced back and forth.

"You can't keep him prisoner over some tea!" she exclaimed. "He's just a sick old man who wouldn't make it a fortnight without a doctor! He'll die if you keep him here!"

"Then he shouldn't have tried to rob the castle!"

Belle threw her hands into the air. "He wasn't trying to rob you! He's an inventor, so he just wanted to see how the sugar bowl works! Why it can move and talk as though it were human! He's not a thief."

"And it's not just a bowl, it's one of my servants! He can't take my servant away!"

"No one was taking your servant! He's not a kidnapper, and he didn't know that it was actually alive." She sat back on her heels. "And from the way you treat everything around here, I wonder if you truly realize it either!"

The beast whirled around and pounced, knocking her back onto the rug before the fireplace. Firelight danced over her features, leaving him speechless for a moment.

Memories of other, happier times when he'd had several other maidens in exactly the same position rolled through him. *What I wouldn't give to be human again.* Loneliness choked him, and despair soon followed. *I'll never be anything more than a monster to her.*

Frozen in fear, she stared up at him. *That's it, I've pushed him too far. He's going to eat me*, she thought. He didn't move and slowly her heart ceased its frantic pounding. Shifting uncomfortably, irritation soon replaced her fear.

She scowled up at the beast. Gathering her courage, she slowly reached up to his shoulders and gave a gentle shove. He didn't move. Belle frowned, confused.

"What are you doing?" she asked uncertainly.

He didn't respond for a long moment, but gradually his snarl lessened and his ears perked back up. She sighed as she lay there, waiting for him to calm.

"What did you mean?" he finally asked. His voice was still low and full of gravel. Menacing, even when he wasn't trying to be. Belle shivered.

He moved back and tossed a log onto the fire. It caught quickly, flaring up while she got to her feet.

"I saw what you did in the great room, and the kitchen," she replied. "Did you know that their souls would go to another object when you destroyed them?"

Does she think I'm a murderer? He gnashed his teeth together and growled at her. "How dare you question me!"

She lifted her eyes to meet his, then took a deep breath. "Mrs. Ambly told me that everyone here used to be human before. Were you once, too?"

CHAPTER 2

The beast stood on his hind legs and roared again in fury, shaking everything around them. He lashed out, swiping at the armoire in the corner. It buckled beneath his assault and fell over. Splinters of wood mixed in with the faded, moth-eaten dresses that spilled from its innards.

Belle rushed over to the door leading to her father's room, blocking it from the beast. Shaking, she grabbed an abandoned broom and held it high, brandishing it like a weapon.

The beast stared at her for a moment, his sides heaving. She didn't move and he stalked out to the hallway, wrenching that door shut behind him. Dust showered the doorway, jarred loose by the force of the slam.

Belle sank to her knees and wrapped her arms around herself. A dam broke within her and she was overcome, sobbing on the floor. Finally she got up and went back into Papa's room. She sat on the floor beside his still form and grasped his hand.

"I don't know how we'll ever get out of here alive," she whispered, spent. "I don't want to make him angry, but it's like I just can't help myself. I'm probably going to get us killed, Papa."

He didn't respond.

"That is, if your ailment doesn't take you from me first." She went to the hall door and found the bowl of melted snow that she had requested, alongside some cloth strips. She brought them back in and wet them, then laid one against her father's forehead.

She stood and surveyed the room. Now clean, it was suitable for an extended stay. *But what about Phoebe?* she worried, biting her lip. *She's*

out there all alone. I should check on her.

Slipping into the hallway, she hurried back to Phoebe's side. The horse was standing pretty much where Belle had left her, her gaze darting around the room.

"Shush, shush, it's only me," Belle soothed as Phoebe jerked her head up in fear. Belle touched the horse's flank, trailing her hand along the animal's side as she walked to her head. "Want to come sleep with me? At least that way I know you're all right."

Phoebe whinnied quietly, bobbing her head as though nodding. Belle wrapped her hand in the creature's mane and led her back to the room. Mrs. Ambly started in surprise as the girl and horse entered.

"Oh! Well, this is quite unorthodox!" she declared.

Belle shrugged. "I was afraid that the beast would eat her," she admitted. "I made him angry."

"Yes, we all heard. It would be best if you didn't upset him so. He tends to ..."

"Overreact?" Belle guessed. "Lose his temper and destroy everything around him?"

"I suppose you could put it like that," Mrs. Ambly replied. "But in his defense, he has had a rather difficult time of it. You would see if you just got to know him."

"I somehow don't think that's going to happen," Belle replied. "I seem to bring out the worst in him."

"Well, you were no little lamb yourself," the teapot chided. "You shouldn't be so harsh when you don't know anything at all about him. He's gotten so used to being alone that I don't think he recalls what it's like to be a stranger in someone else's home."

Belle snorted in exasperation. "Being alone isn't an excuse. He's acting like an animal. A half-wild, untamed animal. I thought you said that he used to be human?"

Mrs. Ambly gave a sad smile. "He was. But this curse ... I think he's slipping a little farther away from us every year. He didn't used to be like this. Not at all." She looked back up at Belle, fierce determination shining in her metal eyes. "You have to tame him, Belle. Show him what it's like to want to be human again. You're wonderful with your horse - if you gave him even half as much care as you give Phoebe, I'm sure he would come around."

"Tame the beast?" Belle repeated slowly. *Is that even possible? He's not just some stray dog to be petted and lured with treats.* She looked down at the shredded carpet. "I'm not usually so forward, but it's very hard to believe that any of this is real." She waved her hand about the room. "A mysterious castle with a beast roaming the halls, never mind enchanted objects that can talk. I'm half-convinced that I've frozen to death beyond the walls, and this is all just a dream."

Mrs. Ambly's tea bubbled as she laughed. "I promise you, we are all very much alive, including you. Give your father a cup of tea, then try to get some rest and things will look better in the morning. I'll be back to check on you two later."

Belle nodded and the cart rolled out. Phoebe wandered a moment, then lay down on the other side of the massive room.

After a lot of coaxing, Belle finally managed to get a cup of the medicinal tea into her father's belly, who had been moved to the bed. She stood, her spine cracking after so long in one position, and made her way to the bed in the other room. Phoebe followed close behind.

Exhausted, Belle sat on the side and laid back, intending to crawl to the center of the feather mattress. She fell asleep with her legs dangling over the side, instead.

~

How did she know? the beast wondered. *Not that it makes a difference. She would never accept me the way I am now.*

He clenched his paws, crushing the guardrail beneath them. He didn't even notice. His gaze remained on the frozen garden stretched out below him. Time and neglect had taken their toll, so what was once a stunning piece of living art now lay fallow. The statues and bird baths were crumbling, or broken altogether. Only one group of statues remained unharmed, even though they were covered with vines.

The roses were mostly gone, disappeared among the weeds that had overtaken everything. The few rosebushes that remained were barren of leaves and covered in snow. One never knew if they would come back in the spring. The wind whipped through, sending flurries high into the air and creating drifts against the castle walls.

He closed his eyes, visualizing instead the way Belle had looked up at him in the firelight, her hands wrapped in his fur as she waited for him to come to his senses. The way she had looked in the courtyard, terrified at first, then determined to save her horse. Her beast.

If she likes the damn thing so much, maybe she could come to like me, too. We're not so different. He again pictured her brushing him by the fire, taking care to get all of the snow off of him after a wild ride.

It's too bad that damned enchantress didn't make me into a horse, instead of this monster, he thought, looking down at his claws. He laughed to himself at the thought of Belle on his back as he pranced through the forest, or some other such ridiculous nonsense. Then he groaned as the image changed and instead it was him - the old him - riding her in a clearing instead.

He groaned and hung his head. "Am I such an animal that all I can think about is fucking the first woman who happens by?" Disgusted with himself, he tried to think of something - anything - else.

But this one is different. I would have wanted her even before all of this. And the way that she cares for her horse, and her father... would that she cared for me like that. If only anyone could.

Caught up in his own head, he couldn't stop his imagination from taking over. *It's been so long. I can almost picture her.*

Her pretty brown eyes staring up at him as she bit her lip after a kiss. Her hands in his hair, pulling him to her for more.

He groaned, panting in the darkness as the fantasy took a very illicit turn.

The smell of her sweet pussy as he eventually buried his face between her legs, licking her from hole to hole. The way she would clench her fingers in his hair as she ground her little nub against his lips, begging him to suck on it. Her screams as he flicked it with his tongue, all the while driving his fingers into her slick, wet, center, rubbing against the front of her canal until she shattered.

Then he would give her clit another kiss, making her jump as he lightly scraped his teeth against her oversensitive flesh. Bite her inner thigh as he got up, only to flip her over to her hands and knees and run his tongue between her sensitive lips once more, all the way up between her cheeks.

He pictured himself taking his cock out and teasing her with it, barely dipping the head in, then pulling it back out and slapping it against her

clit. Doing it again, and maybe once more, driving her wild.

The beast thought of the sounds she would make as she pressed her hips back against him, the moisture from her first orgasm dripping down her thighs as she rubbed the top of his shaft against her clit. How she would reach back to hold him tightly against her, then fondle his balls, pulling on them just right.

He groaned again as he thought about pulling back to tease her again, then slamming his cock into her when she least expected it, sinking into her tight inferno. Crushing her against him as he ground their bodies together, driving himself as deep as he would go. Her back arching to take him all and the way that her lush brown hair would look wrapped around his fist as he pulled it, holding her steady as he drove into her again and again.

He imagined her inner muscles clenching around him, milking his cock as she came again with a shout. He would haul her back up against him as he got close to the edge himself, his hand still wrapped in her hair, holding her head to the side as he whispered to her how fucking delicious she had been.

He would run his other hand over her breasts, cupping them as they jiggled from the force of their bodies slamming together. He wanted to pinch her nipples, first one, then the other, before sliding his hand between her legs again, playing with her clit. Rubbing the little nub until she was seizing around him again, making him lose himself as he pumped into her. He imagined biting her shoulder as ecstasy rolled through them both, then easing her down to the grass and collapsing beside her.

The beast howled in the darkness, the sound brimming with frustrated rage. Belle slept on, undisturbed.

~

Hot breath fanned across her face and Belle opened her eyes to a find a giant set of flat teeth bared before her. She screamed, then rolled away as Phoebe came closer, lipping at her hair. The hall door burst open and the beast charged in, growling.

Phoebe whinnied, half-rearing up in surprise. Belle lurched upright, her eyes wide with fear and shock.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Why did you scream?" he demanded back.

Phoebe whinnied again, stamping her feet. No one moved and she stretched out her neck again, nudging Belle.

"It was nothing. Just Phoebe and her complete lack of respect for personal space," Belle replied drolly. She shoved the horse away. "I suppose she's hungry."

The beast's hackles lowered.

"What were you doing outside my door?" Belle asked.

His hackles rose again as he growled in response. She rolled her eyes and slipped from the bed to go check on her father. He breathed a little easier, but was still warm to the touch.

Straightening, Belle yawned. The beast had followed her.

Belle glanced at him, uncertain. He stared at her, reminding her of a cat stalking a mouse. The thought unsettled her, even as she motioned for him to come back into her side of the suite. "I - um," she trailed off under his unwavering gaze.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I just wanted to say thank you. And I'm sorry for yelling at you yesterday," she said in a rush. "You saved our lives, and while I know Papa's still very sick, the truth is that he wouldn't have survived at all without you and your servants." *Probably. Or he would have found the road and come back home, thus avoiding all of this nonsense if you hadn't locked him away in this blasted room.* She took a deep breath, trying to keep a grip on her fraying temper. *The beast didn't have to save me, though,* she reminded herself. *Or Phoebe. I owe him my thanks for that, at least.*

The beast continued to stare at her, not responding.

"Say something," she finally demanded in exasperation. "It's rude to stare."

He lifted his lips in a half-hearted sneer, baring his teeth. "Like you've stared at me?"

She crossed her arms in annoyance. "Like I can hardly be blamed for that. You leaped over a fifteen-foot wall while carrying me, then got in my face and threatened to eat me. What did you expect?"

He crossed the room on all fours, then circled her like he had in the courtyard. She didn't move as her heart pounded. His shoulder pushed

against her, crowding her.

"Do you mind?" she finally snapped, tired of his behavior. "Only brutes and monsters invade a lady's space uninvited. I know you used to be human, so could you kindly act like it?"

"Monsters? Since you already consider me one, I suppose it's only fitting that I act the part." *She's right though. What am I doing? I never would have manhandled a woman before.* Internally shaken, he backed a few steps away. *Am I truly losing myself that much?*

Belle blushed. The progression of pink marching through her cheeks distracted him from his thoughts.

"I'm sorry for calling you that," she murmured. "It was unkind of me."

"Are you sure?"

Her eyes flicked up to his, and he could see sincerity in them. *What a surprise. She means it.*

"Yes. A monster wouldn't have saved me, or helped rescue Phoebe. I was frightened and didn't know what else to call you. It was ill-done of me."

"Beast."

"What?" she recoiled in surprise. "You think I'm a beast?"

He gave a short laugh. "No. My name. You can call me Beast."

"Oh." She was quiet a moment.

I wonder what she's thinking. His tail flicked back and forth in agitation as she remained silent.

"My name is Belle. It's nice to meet you, Beast."

He snorted in surprised disbelief as she extended her hand. It trembled slightly. *She's a brave little thing. Who would have thought?*

He rose to his back feet, standing straight before her. A macabre sense of delight filled him as he watched her throat work, swallowing with trepidation. Her gaze traveled up, up, up as she took in his full height, several feet over hers. But she didn't drop her hand.

He took it, gently engulfing it in his own. He gave her a tiny squeeze, then let go. "It's nice to meet you, too."

Belle let out a shaky breath as she gave him a wobbly smile. "All right, then."

He dropped back to all fours, then walked toward the door. The strangely companionable mood was making him uncomfortable.

"Did you need something else?" she called after him. "You were waiting outside of my room earlier."

He stopped and looked back, waiting for her to elaborate. *I need a lot of things from you, Belle. But I don't think you'd like to give them.* His fantasy from last night flashed through his mind and he ground his teeth together. *What is **wrong** with me? She's right - I am a monster for automatically thinking such things.*

"Because I need to go speak with Mrs. Ambly and get some more tea for Papa, and then see if anyone knows if there is any hay or oats that Phoebe could eat." She glanced out the window. "Hopefully this clears up and we can go home soon."

The beast scowled as anger, and something else, flashed through him. "No, you can't."

"But Papa is sick, and I need to take him home," Belle replied slowly. "Why can't we leave?"

He thought quickly, searching for a reason to keep her there. With him. "Because he's my prisoner. He can only leave when I say his debt is paid."

Belle's face grew red. "You can't just *decide* that he's your prisoner and that you get to *keep* him like he's some kind of stray dog! That's absurd!" She marched over to stand between Papa's door and the beast, her hands on her hips. "He's sick and needs to go home to recover!"

The beast heard the tremor of fear in her voice and knew he had her. He gave a semblance of a grin, his canines gleaming as he came closer. She shrank back. "He stays. But I have no use for him if he dies, so you can stay to take care of him."

"Here?" She took a step away. "You're serious? Where we have none of his herbs, medicines, fresh clothes, or even *food*. Keeping us here would kill him, for sure." Shaking her head, she continued, "I'm taking him home to the village as soon as possible. You still have your silly sugar bowl, so I don't see the problem."

"The *problem* is, what will he tell everyone? What will you tell them, for that matter? If I let people break into my home, harass my servants, attempt to steal from me and then nurse them back to health and just *let them go* without any consequences, then everyone will try to rob the castle."

"Neither of us will say anything, I promise."

He huffed at her. "Why should I believe you? Keeping him assures me that you won't say anything. He will stay here until he has made reparations for what he took from me." He snapped his teeth together.

"You can't do that!"

He growled, growing more and more annoyed at her determination to run away as soon as she could. "Who is going to stop me? Your father is mine. He will stay here until I see fit to let him go."

"What if ... what if we could repay you somehow? For the food, tea and night's lodging?" She paused. "You did save my life, and his, in a way."

He shrugged and dropped back to all fours. "I have no use for money."

"Then what do you want?"

He turned toward the door. "I already told you. He stays. There are various things he can do around the castle to pay off his debt."

She hurried to catch up before he left the room, barring the door with her body.

"What if I stay instead?" she asked breathlessly, trepidation evident in her voice. "I can help with whatever needs to be done, instead of him. He needs to go home."

"You would do that?" His hazel, almost greenish eyes pierced hers. "You would stay here in his place? With me?"

Her eyebrows came together and she looked flustered. "Are you going to hurt me?"

The beast shook. "No." A devilish thought popped into his head and he grinned at her, flashing those teeth. "Not if I can help it."

She took a deep breath, inadvertently pressing her full breasts tight against her bodice. "Then I'll stay. But only on one condition," she quickly added.

Growling, he asked, "What condition?"

"I need to take Papa home to the village as soon as the snow clears."

He nodded.

"And stay until he is well enough to take care of himself," she pressed.

"What?" the beast roared. "You just said you would take his place, and now you are already trying to get out of it?"

She held her hands up before her, trying to soothe him. "I'll come back, I'll come back. I promise." A quick glance at the door adjoining the other room. "Just not until Papa is well."

The beast's ears flattened against his skull and he growled his displeasure. "Two weeks, then you stay as my prisoner instead of him."

"One month. But I will come back every Tuesday so you know I haven't run away."

"It could not possibly take a month for him to recover. Three weeks, with weekly visits here, or I will drag you both back myself."

She blanched at the thought of him in the village, but hurriedly nodded.

"So we have a deal, then?" He rose to his back feet and extended one of his front paws, this time in agreement, instead of introduction. Belle hesitated a moment, then put her hand in his.

His paw wasn't exactly what she had expected. His claws retracted into pads much like a cat's, and while his skin was calloused from years of walking on all fours, his fur wasn't awful. *It might even be soft, if he ever washed it.*

He closed his fingers around her hand, so tiny in comparison, and lifted it to his mouth. She tensed, but he only pressed his thin lips against it. A kiss, of sorts.

Heart pounding, she willed herself not to yank her hand away.

The beast tightened his grip as he grinned at her, exposing his canines.

"Why are you frightened, little beauty?"

She tried unsuccessfully to tug her hand from his grasp. "I'm not."

"Liar. I can smell it. Taste it, even." His tongue flicked out, rasping across her knuckles.

She gasped and jerked her hand back, earning that odd chuffing sound from him again. He dropped back to all fours and circled her, brushing up against her on all sides. Invading her space even more.

He inhaled deeply, breathing her in. He tasted fear, anxiety, nervousness. The healthy dose of trepidation pulled him up short and he backed off. *I'm doing it again. Why do I keep doing that?* Luckily, she didn't mention it.

"I won't hurt you," he promised. "You don't need to be afraid."

She narrowed her eyes at him, her back going ramrod straight. "I told you, I'm not afraid of you. And I would appreciate it if you would keep your tongue to yourself." She turned away, clearly dismissing him. "Now if you don't mind being on your way, I need to speak with Mrs. Ambly."

Amusement bubbled up inside him, surprising him. It had been a long time since anyone made him laugh this often. "Brave little thing, aren't you? Daring to tell the beast what to do."

"It seems to me, *sir*, that you have been left on your own far too much if you think *that* was appropriate behavior with a lady."

"What would you prefer?"

She glanced around the stately room. "I'm assuming that you were a gentleman once, considering this place and the fact that the servants seem to answer to you. So act like one." With that, she swept from the room in search of his head housekeeper.

"I never was any good at that," he muttered.

CHAPTER 3

Around the corner, Belle leaned against the wall, her heart in her throat. *What was I thinking?! He could easily snap me in half. So why do I keep pushing him?*

She pressed her trembling hands against the stone wall at her back and stood. *I just need to get Papa home, then everything will be all right. But he needs medicine first.* She strode purposefully down the hall.

But then I have to come back, she reminded herself. *Once a week, then who knows for how long? And what could he possibly want me to do here?* A quick glance around answered that question. Even the hallway was in disrepair, dust and filth coated the floors. Something moved at the end of the hall and Belle hurried down it, hoping to find Mrs. Ambly there.

She came out into the great room, blinked in confusion and double-checked the hall to make sure she was in the right place. Where broken furniture had littered the floors last night, pristine rugs now sat upon freshly mopped stones. The room was quite toasty, as a roaring fire quickly disposed of the demolished tabletops and chair legs. Various animated things were walking around with mops and dust rags, cleaning up the last of the dirt. Even the stairs gleamed, although the upper hallways didn't seem to have been touched yet.

Mrs. Ambly rolled the tea cart over.

"How did this happen so quickly?" Belle asked, stunned.

The housekeeper chortled with delight. "Do you like it?"

Belle nodded.

"Good! I had hoped that you would, since you will be staying with us a while. I'm sorry it was in such a state when you arrived, but we rarely get

any visitors, you see. Come, I have another surprise for you."

Belle followed the cart from the room, too stunned to respond. *If they can clean everything so quickly, what am I to do for Papa's debt?*

They went down several short hallways to emerge from a door at the back of the castle. Belle blinked rapidly as she stepped outside, temporarily blinded by the bright morning sun reflecting off of the snow a few feet away.

Timbers creaked as the coat rack helped a china hutch push a giant log into place. A chandelier helped steady it from above, then quickly nailed it into place, hammering with several of its sweeping arms. The log braced an obviously new section of roof and Belle followed it with her eyes to see a large stable built against the side of the castle. Hay lined the floor and buckets of water and oats rested nearby.

"Isn't it lovely?" Mrs. Ambly bubbled. "The Master instructed us to set it up first thing this morning. Now Phoebe will have some place to sleep and you won't have to go all the way to the old stables in the cold."

Belle could only nod. *The beast did this for us?*

"This wall is very close to the kitchen, so it will provide enough heat that she doesn't need a fire, and the stable hand has managed to find several blankets that will do for this weather. Would you like to bring her around to see how she likes it?"

Belle nodded again, still dumbstruck.

"All right then, run along. I'll find the stable hand, James, and you can meet him when you get back."

"Thank you!" Belle called over her shoulder as she hurried inside, excited to get Phoebe. She hustled back to her rooms, only to find a tray of fresh tea and her father sitting before the fire. He glanced over at her as he dipped a thick slice of bread into a steaming bowl of soup.

Thank you, Mrs. Ambly, Belle thought with a twinge of guilt. *I didn't even ask about the tea yet.*

"Good morning, Belle. Would you like a bite?" he asked, offering her a chunk of bread. Phoebe stood nearby.

Belle's stomach growled and she sat on the small couch beside him. "Good morning, Papa. How are you feeling?" She pressed her hand against his forehead. Still warm.

"Fine, fine. I'm perfectly fine." He waved her hand away, then held the bread up again. "But you must try this."

She broke off a meager piece, then pressed the rest back into his hand. "Just a bite then, but you need to eat the rest. It will help you get better."

He tried to disagree, but was cut off by someone knocking on the door. Belle opened it to find the coat rack standing before her. It bowed awkwardly, legs arching out so as not to topple over.

"Well, hello," she murmured. "What can I do for you?"

"I come for the horse, missus," it replied, still bent over. "Me name's James and I'll be takin' care of 'er." Reins and a bit dangled from one arm.

"All right then, James. But I'll walk with you to the stables so she doesn't get spooked by all of the strange," she waved her hand, "goings-on in the castle. And I'm not married, so just Belle will do."

James straightened. "Yes, Miss Belle. This way then, please."

Belle smiled a little as she turned away to get Phoebe. James waited in the doorway, fidgeting. He creaked as he shifted on spindly legs.

Phoebe bobbed her head and sniffed suspiciously at the reins. Belle soothed her, then slipped the straps over her ears and the bit between her teeth. She grabbed her cloak on the way out.

"I have a surprise for you," she murmured. "A nice big bucket of oats and plenty of hay, all to yourself."

The horse's ears perked up and she stepped a little quicker as Belle led her into the hall. They made an odd procession - Belle leading the nervous horse, then James the walking coat rack bringing up the rear.

Belle heaved a sigh of relief when they made it to the new stable. Phoebe dug into her breakfast with gusto, burying her nose in the feed buckets.

"Looks like she's happy to be out here, eh, miss?" James asked. He pulled a brush from somewhere and settled to wait until the horse was done eating. "Sure is nice to have someone to look after again."

Belle smiled, recognizing a kindred spirit. "I'm sure you'll do a wonderful job, James. Thank you for everything."

"Oh, tweren't nothing, Miss. It was all the master's idea. He said you loved this old girl and we would have to take good care of her while you're here."

"I'll have to thank him for that," she murmured. "Do you know where he is?"

The coat rack shrank back a little. "Ah, not really, Miss. He might be in his rooms in the West Wing, but no one's allowed in there." His voice

dropped conspiratorially. "He gets a little broody sometimes. I wouldn't advise interrupting him."

Belle laughed. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Right then, Miss. I'll let you know if she needs anything, and you come see her whenever you like. I can have her saddled up right quick if you want to take her for a run later, maybe stretch both your legs for a bit."

Excitement flowed through Belle even as she shivered in her thin cloak. She grinned at James, eyes sparkling. "I would love to. Maybe after it's warmed up a bit this afternoon, though."

The top of the coat rack bobbled in what she assumed was a nod. "I can walk her around meself if it starts snowing again, Miss." He gave a small laugh. "I suppose one good thing about bein' this way is that I can't feel the cold."

"Way to be optimistic about the situation, James. I like it."

"Yes, Miss." Humor laced his voice.

Belle went inside to find Mrs. Ambly. The teapot was directing more staff, armed with mops and dust rags this time, around the battered old kitchen.

"May I ask you a question?"

The housekeeper looked back at her, the entire pot hopping up and down to turn in the cart. "Of course, dear. What can I help you with?"

Belle paused a moment. "Can ... can the beast read?"

Mrs. Ambly frowned. "I'm not sure that he was ever very good at it, why?"

Belle glanced at the door to the new stable. "Well, I wanted to thank him. But James told me not to go looking for him, and Papa and I might be leaving today, so I wanted to write a note instead," Belle said in a hurry. "But if you don't think he can read it, I don't suppose there would be much of a point."

"Are you trying to avoid him, dearie?" Mrs. Ambly asked. Her jovial tone belied the tension in her small frame. "Because while I understand why you might try to leave without telling him yourself, I don't think it would be a good idea - "

"Oh, no! Of course not!" Belle sputtered. *Though it had crossed my mind*. "I just wanted to thank him for the stable." *Without being eaten. Or licked again.* Her cheeks grew uncomfortably warm at the thought.

"If you're sure," Mrs. Ambly trailed off. "Write your note and I'll see that he gets it, even if I have to read it to him myself."

The stove lifted a metal arm high into the air. "Your breakfast is ready!" his voice boomed out. Cooking flames rose in time with his words, flaring high into the air around him.

Belle gasped. Mrs. Ambly chuckled.

"Don't be frightened. He won't hurt you."

Belle hung back, unconvinced. "How do you know?" she whispered.

"Because the master would have his head if he did," Mrs. Ambly replied quietly.

The stove scowled. Its face was made of multicolored tiles in the back splash. It set a tray on the counter nearby, away from the flames.

"There, you see? Nothing to be afraid of. Now hurry along and I'll have someone fetch you a quill and some paper."

Belle swallowed. The stove and teapot both stared at her in expectation. Hustling across the large kitchen, she grabbed the tray and turned to go back to her room.

The stove flared up behind her, flames almost reaching the ceiling. Belle gave a tiny shriek of surprise, then scowled at the offending thing.

It grinned back.

"Cookie, that wasn't very nice. You know what the master would say," Mrs. Ambly admonished, trying unsuccessfully to hide her smile.

"Come now, girl! Where's your spirit? Don't tell me this place has gotten the better of you already!" Cookie teased.

Belle slowly smiled back, then stuck her tongue out at the chef. He roared with laughter, flames twisting around the burners once more.

"That's more like it!"

She grinned. "Perhaps next time I go out, I'll bring back a little snow to cool that hot head of yours."

"And perhaps tomorrow I'll burn your sticky buns," he retorted.

"We'll see about that," she said with a laugh, turning down the hallway. She gave Mrs. Ambly a small wave, then retreated to her rooms. Papa was resting again by the time she got back, so she hurried to her side, her belly growling in anticipation.

Breakfast consisted of several sweet, sticky buns liberally doused with honey, and a small jug of milk. A scrambled egg completed the meal and Belle leaned back on the settee, her belly pleasantly full.

Someone knocked on the door. She hurriedly gathered everything back onto her tray and exchanged it for the paper and quill sitting on the chair just outside of her doorway.

"Thank you."

The chair curtseyed, sending the tray sliding along the cushion. Belle laughed as she steadied it.

"You don't have to do that. I'm not a lady."

"Sorry, Miss. We just haven't had any visitors in so long," the chair replied.

"My name is Belle. Thank you for bring me this, and for taking my dishes back to Cookie."

"Yes, Miss. Right away."

"Wait a moment," Belle called out.

The chair's back twisted around as though looking back at her.

"What's your name?"

"Felicity, Miss."

Belle smiled. "I'm pleased to meet you, Felicity."

"Thank you, Miss. I mean, I am too." She hurried away with the tray.

Belle shut her door and leaned against it for a moment, then went back to the settee before the fire. She pulled the couch closer to the heat, then tugged a small side table over as well. Properly warm, she stared at the blank pages before her.

What on earth am I going to write? she wondered, chewing on her lower lip. *I can't very well call him "Beast", can I? What about "Master"?*

She shook her head. *No, no, let's not be putting any ideas into his head. I'm not a servant.* Glanced at the door to her father's room. *Well, a prisoner, but not a servant.*

Belle sighed.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your consideration of my horse, Phoebe. I'm certain that she will like the stable you commissioned for her as much as I do, and will be very comfortable there.

Belle stopped. Reread it. Sighed and crumpled it into a ball that she halfheartedly tossed at the fireplace.

She missed. *I sound like an imbecile.*

Dear Sir,

I wish to express my gratitude for providing a stable for my horse. I appreciate your consideration and effort on her behalf. It gives me great comfort in knowing that she is safe here.

Yours Truly,

Belle

Belle shook her head in disgust. *This is still awful. And "Yours Truly"? That's not true at all.* She nibbled on the end of the quill as she thought. *Regards? Yes, that's much better. And "Dear"? I don't think so.*

Another crumpled up attempt later, she sighed in disgust. *What on earth am I going to write that doesn't make me sound completely and utterly foolish? What does one write in a letter to a beast? Especially one that probably can't read? Ugh.*

She grabbed the last sheet of paper and the quill. *I can do this. Just write something, or thank him in person.*

She grimaced and began to write.

Sir,

Thank you for the stable. Phoebe loves it, and I feel better knowing that she is safe during our time here. I appreciate your consideration of her well-being.

Regards,

Belle

elle read over it. Reread it again. Shrugged and blew on it to dry the ink. *I suppose that will have to do.* She folded it carefully.

There was a knock on the adjoining doorway. Belle looked over to see Papa standing in the portal, a sheepish smile on his face.

"Hello, love. What have you got there?" he asked.

She stood and went to give him a quick hug, then helped him to her settee. "Just a letter for the beast. How are you feeling?"

"A letter for the beast?" Papa's eyebrows went up. "Why are you writing him a letter? Do you think he can read it?"

Shrugging, Belle glanced down at the letter. "I'm not sure. Mrs. Ambly said she would make sure he knows what it says, though."

Papa didn't respond, but waited for her to answer his first question. She sighed.

"He had a stable built against the kitchen wall for Phoebe," Belle finally murmured. "I was surprised, and wanted to say thank you. But I'm hoping that we can leave today, and I didn't want him to think me ungrateful for his consideration. So I wrote him a letter." *So I don't have to see him, or his tongue, again.* The back of her hand tingled once more.

"Leaving? Oh, Belle, I can't leave. I'm his prisoner." He looked away sadly. "I'm afraid I put a sugar bowl in my pocket to look at in my workshop and he thought I was stealing it. I would have brought it back." His eyes met hers. "I just wanted to see how it worked."

Belle patted his hand. "It's all right, Papa. I've worked it out with him and you're not a prisoner any more. We are going to go home and you're going to get better. I'll come back here one day a week to help clean this place up and work off our debts. So you needn't worry about it anymore."

"One day a week? That's all? Why, that's great news! But it should be me doing the work, not you. It was my mistake. How long do you have to keep returning?"

It was Belle's turn to look away. "Just a few weeks." She picked at a seam on her dress.

"Belle. Tell me the truth, girl." Papa covered her anxious fingers with his hand. "Don't be afraid."

She forced a bright smile and threaded her fingers through his. "Truly, it will only be a few weeks, then I am to discuss it with the beast. We just

need to get you home so you can get better. Nothing else matters right now."

"What are you going to discuss? I don't like this, Belle."

A knock at the door saved her from further explanation. Hurrying over, she found Mrs. Ambly on the other side. Steam rose from her lid and two cups sat beside her on the cart.

"I've just come to check on your father and bring you a fresh cup of tea," she said, rolling into the room. "How are you feeling, sir?"

Papa stared at the talking teapot with rapt attention. "Much better, thank you."

She levitated into the air and hot tea poured from her spout.

"How is this possible?" Papa whispered. "What are you?"

"Oh, I'm just a housekeeper, sir," she replied with a little laugh. "Nothing special about me."

"You're amazing," he murmured. "May I hold you?" He extended his hands in her direction.

"Oh, my," Mrs. Ambly let out a surprisingly girlish giggle. "I suppose so, once I've finished with the tea. I wouldn't want to burn you."

"I wouldn't mind."

Belle smiled. "Papa, meet Mrs. Ambly. She's been a wonderful help and I don't think you would have gotten better without her. She's been bringing us tea and peppermint paste to help you breathe."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ambly," Papa said as she poured Belle's drink.

She smiled, her metal cheeks puffing out with the force of it. *Why, I think she would blush if she could*, Belle thought with amusement.

Mrs. Ambly hopped onto his outstretched hands. He lifted her so that they were eye to eye and locked gazes for a moment.

"I don't understand how you work," he said. "Are you really alive, somehow?"

She leaned toward him with a twinkle in her eye. "It's magic," she said conspiratorially.

"Well, I knew that already. But *how?*" He lifted her a little higher, trying to peek at her bottom.

"Well, now!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Papa, remember that she's still a lady," Belle chastised. "Don't manhandle her."

"Quite right," he said, lowering the teapot quickly. Red stained his cheeks. "Sorry, don't know what I was thinking."

Mrs. Ambly laughed again, her voice still a little higher than usual. "Don't worry on my account, it's been a long time since anyone's tried to look up my skirts, even when I could wear them."

Papa chortled along with her. "And what about Mr. Ambly? Is he a spoon or some such thing to keep you company?"

"Alas, but no. He was taken from me very early on. Luckily, he didn't have to endure being transformed, but like I said, it's been a long time." She said it matter of factly, without sadness. "I think he would have appreciated that bit about being a spoon though."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Papa replied. "Belle's mother died a long time ago as well."

What is happening right now? Belle wondered, watching them.

"I'm sorry. That must have been lonely for you," Mrs. Ambly said. He nodded, drawing the teapot closer. "Maybe one day, you'll meet another lucky lady to hold you and give you comfort."

"Maybe so. who's to say?" He lifted her again and smiled. "Until then, I've always got you," he teased.

She laughed. "Lot of good I'd do you," she replied. "You'll get no comfort from me, I'm afraid. Now then, I've got to be along my way. I have lots to do."

He lowered her back to her tea cart.

"Keep your cups til later, dears. I'll send someone round to collect them."

The cart rolled toward the doorway. Belle set her cup down on the table and saw the letter just as Mrs. Ambly left.

"Mrs. Ambly! Wait a moment, please!" Belle called as she grabbed it and jumped to her feet. "Mrs. Ambly!" She ran after her.

Bursting through the doorway, she almost tripped over the tea cart. Mrs. Ambly whirled with a gasp of surprise.

"Belle!" She sniffled. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, I just wanted to give you my letter for the beast," Belle replied slowly, looking at her with concern. "Mrs. Ambly, are *you* all right? Why are you crying?"

The housekeeper rubbed her face against a napkin. "Oh, it's nothing, dear. Don't worry on my account."

Impetuously, Belle picked the teapot up and hugged her. "Please tell me."

The teapot laughed a little, but the sound was muffled by Belle's shoulder. She held Mrs. Ambly out at arm's length. "See, that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"Thank you, dear." She gave a watery smile. "That's exactly the problem, actually. So many years without affection, or even human contact, save every once in a while, will wear a soul down. We eventually just got used to it. But now you're here and I remember what it was like to have a job I loved. To have someone to take care of."

The housekeeper sniffled again as she glanced past Belle toward the beast's wing. "I think we all have, and that makes it a little difficult."

"Oh." Belle frowned and stepped back. She crossed her arms over her belly. "I'm sorry. We will be leaving soon, if that helps."

"Actually, I think it will make it worse. You've done nothing wrong, just reminded us what we are missing out on. You've brought a bit of light back into this dreary old place, and you shouldn't be sorry for that. In fact, I think I'll miss you."

"It will only be until Tuesday, Mrs. Ambly. I'll be back then."

"Posh, girl. That's not the same. You'll just be here a few hours. You'll be so busy that you won't have time to sit with me, or tease Cookie." Another sniffle. "You've utterly delighted him, you know. He keeps going on about 'finally, a girl in the castle' as though you've come to stay forever."

"Oh, I couldn't. Papa needs me at home. He gets sick easily, and we have chickens, a goat and a house to take care of. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Ambly nodded. "I know, dear, I know. Cookie knows as well. And your father is nice enough, but he does need someone to look after him." Perking back up a little, she said, "Now, then, let me get this to the Master. He wouldn't like knowing that I had dallied while you want to speak with him."

Belle flinched the tiniest bit. "I don't actually want to bother him - I just wanted to thank him for the stable before we go."

"Oh, no one is going anywhere today. The snow's started again, so I expect that you'll be staying another few nights before it clears up. I'm sure you'll be able to get your father home soon, but he seems to be doing much better already. So I'm sure there's no rush."

"Oh." Belle watched as Mrs. Ambly rolled down the hallway. She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice as she said, "Well, then it looks like we might be staying a while longer."

The housekeeper positively beamed as she turned the corner.

CHAPTER 4

"A letter? Why would she write me a letter?" the beast growled. The early afternoon sun lit his room.

Etienne, the candelabra, shrugged. "Maybe she thought you would be busy."

The beast stared at him.

"Well, she is not allowed in your wing, so she does not know what you are doing. It is better than her coming to look for you herself, no?"

A half-hearted snarl was all the Frenchman got in response.

"Well, what does it say?" the beast demanded.

"Ahh. Let me see." The paper rustled as he unfolded it. "Sir, Thank you for the stable. Phoebe loves it, and I feel better knowing that she is safe during our time here. I appreciate your consideration of her well-being. Regards, Belle."

"That's it?"

The valet scanned it again quickly. "What were you expecting?"

He scowled. "I don't know. Something else."

"Ah, ah, ah, do I detect a bit of disappointment from zee master? Maybe you wanted her to thank you in person, eh?" The candelabra hopped over and bent one arm to prod him with. "Maybe demonstrate her gratitude?"

The beast snorted and moved away. "Don't be ridiculous. She's a beautiful girl, and I'm nothing but a monster. What are you expecting her to do?"

"True. But as they say, stranger things have happened."

"Really? Aside from this?" sarcasm laced Beast's voice. "Please, tell me what."

"Ahhh ..." Etienne trailed off.

"Exactly."

"Well, what would you like to write back to her?"

"Nothing."

"But Master, a pretty girl sent you a letter. You should respond to it." He plucked a broken quill out of the mess that littered the old dressing table. "A poem, maybe? Or a note about how her hair flows in the wind and she smells of jasmine, perhaps?"

The beast retreated to his balcony overlooking the garden. "She doesn't smell like jasmine." He closed his eyes, remembering her under him on the rug before the fire. Running her hands through his fur.

"She smells like cinnamon." He thought of tasting her skin earlier that morning and stifled a groan. "And honey."

Etienne grinned. "Apologies, I have not actually met her, myself." He twirled the quill around one of his candles. "So, you wish me to mention that in the letter?"

"No, of course not. Just ... just tell her to come to dinner with me. Tonight."

Etienne thought about it a moment, then began, speaking aloud as he wrote.

My Dearest Lady,

I would greatly enjoy the pleasure of your company at dinner this evening. Would you please join me?

Ever Your Servant,

"How would you like me to sign it, my lord?" the candelabra asked.

"Just Beast."

Etienne frowned, his arms drooping. "But my lord, surely your given name would be more appropriate ..."

"No." The beast shook his head. "That's who I was a long time ago. Not anymore. And even then, I answered to Beast. So just leave it."

"But sir - " Etienne tried again.

"I said leave it!"

Etienne shrank back under the oppressive force of his master's demand. He quickly signed the letter, then held it out for the beast to look over.

Beast waved it away. "I don't want to rip it," he said, holding up one massive paw. His claws gleamed.

"Yes, of course." Etienne bowed and hurried to the door.

"Make sure someone replaces the wardrobe in her room. And get her some new clothes today."

"And some for her father, as well?"

"I don't care."

"But, sir, I think it would be something the girl would appreciate. She is very concerned for her papa. If you considered him as well, I think she would be grateful," Etienne murmured with a wink.

Beast cocked his head, considering the valet's words. "Fine. Do it." He walked out onto his balcony. The snow was falling again. A soft layer of powder already lay around the feet of the statues below.

She has to stay another day. How much longer will this last? The estate gate creaked. Anger flooded his mind. *She better not be trying to run away!*

Snarling, he leaped from the balcony and skidded in the snow. Lowering himself to all fours, he sprinted toward the gate, intent on bringing Belle back.

It was closed.

She was nowhere in sight.

But why did it creak?

Wolf prints littered the snow beyond the gate, along with something else. Small, child-sized human footprints wandered from the trees to the gate, then away.

Beast snorted as he lowered his head and sniffed at them from the courtyard. *Fairies. Ugh.*

He growled in annoyance, then roared out a warning. *Bloody fairies.* The footsteps continued around the corner of the wall.

They better not have come into the keep somewhere else. What if they're here for Belle? He cleared the stone wall in a single bound.

The footsteps continued for a few more yards, then disappeared. Beast inhaled deeply and their stench filled his nose. *They're still close.*

He stomped in a circle around the prints, shaking his head when he couldn't find more. He roared in frustration.

Phoebe whinnied nearby. Rage bubbled up as he heard Belle's voice shushing the animal. *She's trying to run away!*

He vaulted over the wall, landing a few mere feet away from them.

Belle screamed. Phoebe bolted, jerking the reins from her hand. Belle stumbled, then fell in the snow.

"What are you doing out here?" Beast demanded with a growl.

Belle whipped her head up with a scowl. She pushed herself to an upright position and dusted snow from her front, glaring at him the whole time.

"What on earth are *you* doing?! You scared us half to death! Poor Phoebe nearly had a heart attack."

She tried to stand and winced.

"Why were you running away?" he demanded.

Both of Belle's eyebrows went up and she just stared at him, incredulous. "What are you talking about?"

He prowled in front of her with a snarl. "I saw you!"

Hands on her hips, Belle didn't back down. "What *exactly* did you see?"

The beast rose to his hind feet, towering above her. "I saw the fairies that you called for help, and I saw you leading that blasted horse to the gate so you could leave!"

"Fairies?" Her droll tone began to sink in. "You think that I called fairies to help me escape? Out into this?" She waved a hand at the snow, which was starting to thicken again.

Beast began to respond, but she cut him off. "Even though you and I have an agreement that I will come back once a week to work off my father's debts? And running away would not only void that agreement, but also *abandon* him here with you?"

The beast's hackles lowered as he took a step back. "I didn't think about -"

Belle slashed her hand through the air, effectively stopping him. "No! Don't tell me what you didn't think about, because you obviously didn't

think at all. Not to mention that I was leading Phoebe instead of riding her, because she doesn't even have her saddle on."

He dropped back to all fours, leaving them at eye level. "Then what were you doing out here?"

She heaved a sigh and began limping back toward the castle. "I was taking her for a walk. She needed the exercise and I needed to get out of there for a little while. To think."

Beast hurried in front of her and stopped. "Why are you walking like that? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. He growled lowly, a mere rumble in his chest. Rolling her eyes, she replied, "I turned my ankle when Phoebe jerked away. It's nothing."

Guilt flashed through him and he glanced away, toward the horse's tracks in the snow.

"I'll carry you. And send someone back out to fetch her once we get inside."

"What?"

He stood tall again and reached for her. She pushed him away, shaking her head.

"No. Don't be silly - I can walk."

Ignoring her protests, he wrapped his paws around her waist, then marveled at how small she was. His fingers easily touched on either side of her ribs.

He lifted her, slightly reassured when it took him a little effort. She was small, but seemed sturdy enough. He held her out in front of him, unsure of what to do next.

"Put me down."

He grinned at her, then tossed her over one shoulder.

Belle sputtered as her belly hit his shoulder and she began to tip over it, sliding across the massive expanse. A nervous scream escaped her lips just before he hooked one paw over the back of her knees, effectively stopping her descent. He reached back, grabbed her hips and lifted her again to settle her back into place.

"Put me down!" She demanded, humiliated and angry. "I told you I could walk!"

Her blue skirts spread out around her, revealing her calves. Beast wrapped one paw around the back of her thighs to hold her in place,

causing the fabric to ride up a little more.

His fur tickled against the back of her legs, leaving little tendrils of heat despite the cold weather. She gasped and wriggled, trying to to smooth the dress down behind her.

He shifted his paw higher. She froze when it skimmed over her rear to settle at the small of her back, holding her in place. He barely nuzzled into her side for a moment, then began walking to the castle.

Again. The thought startled Belle out of her haze and indignation stiffened her back.

"Put me down this instant!" she demanded, kicking. He ducked to avoid her foot, then wrapped his other paw around those as well.

"Your feet are freezing. Why are you wearing these ridiculous shoes in the snow?" he asked, incredulous. The thin flats were soaking wet and her toes were icy in his grip. "Where are your boots?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't have any. Or clearly I would have worn them."

"Mrs. Ambly should be providing anything that you need," he said. Displeasure caused his chest to rumble, and the vibrations curled up through Belle's stomach, leaving tingles in their wake.

So many years without human contact will wear on you... Belle thought back to the housekeeper's words that morning. She stared at the back of his head uncertainly. *Maybe if I try, he won't be so angry all the time.*

Taking a deep breath, she threaded her fingers through his mane, stroking it.

"Don't be angry. I didn't tell her that I was going to take Phoebe for a walk. So she didn't know that I was going to come outside."

The beast's steps faltered. "What are you doing?"

She stopped, cringing a little. "Nothing."

"Were you just ... petting me?"

Swallowing hard, she remained silent.

"I'm not a dog." Tension radiated outward from his stiff shoulders.

"I - I know. I didn't mean it like that," she said. *I must be patient. He'll come around eventually.* "It was just something that Mrs. Ambly said earlier. About not ever having any affection, and it wearing on them all. I just thought ..." she trailed off.

"Thought what?" he pressed. They entered the castle and turned down the hallway to her room.

"Thought it sounded lonely," she finally finished.

"Lonely? And what would you know about being lonely?" Beast scoffed. "Look at you. How could you ever be lonely?"

He dumped her at her door, setting her down harder than he meant to. She winced and regret, followed quickly by anger at himself, flashed through him. He did his best to swallow them both as he rolled his shoulders, feeling a little bereft without her weight on them.

"I know what it's like to be lonely," she murmured, eyes downcast. She steadied herself on the door handle.

"Ha. I bet you've got plenty of friends in whatever little village you came from."

She's so pretty, she must be spoiled. She uses her looks to get what she wants. Acts like she's better than us, always got her nose stuck in a book, her father and sister are crazy, maybe she's crazy too. The litany of things she had overheard in the village went through her head.

"You might be surprised," Belle replied. "They think I'm odd."

Beast snorted and opened her door. "I can see why." He winked.

Belle's jaw dropped as a blush crept up her cheeks. She snapped it shut and pushed her way into the room, intending to leave him out in the hallway.

Beast grabbed her by the waist and picked her up again, this time cradling her in the crook of his elbow. He laughed at her outraged expression, but gentled when he noticed the tears threatening to fall.

"You go out of your way to anger the beast that everyone else is terrified of, after all. That's fairly odd."

She looked up at him, shocked. He grinned down at her, and slowly, she found herself smiling back. "Are you teasing me, sir?"

"Trying to, at least. And don't call me sir."

He crossed the room to the bed and set her down on it, much more gently this time. Without hesitation, he reached for her skirts and flipped them up, dragging the hem past her knees.

They both froze a moment. He recovered first, smoothing one paw under her bare knees to raise them slightly.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Belle hissed. "Stop that!" She pushed his paw away.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he replied, his voice gruffer than usual. "Be still."

He slid a pillow beneath her knees. The snow-soaked hem of her dress slid upward a few more inches, revealing a bit of her thighs.

Beast's eyes followed it, and he licked his lips. Belle shrank back, a fascinated dread filling her heart as she watched him watch her.

Just a few more inches, he willed the hem to slide farther. His intention to prop up her injured foot and call Mrs. Ambly to treat it fell by the wayside as primitive, animalistic instincts welled within him. *Just a little farther. I want to see, at least.* The impulse to bury his face between her legs was almost overwhelming.

"Beast?" Belle whispered his name. He took a deep breath to steady himself. The scent of her filled his head, making it worse.

"Beast?" Louder now.

She touched his shoulder. He exploded into movement, breaking over her like a wave against rocks. One of her legs got tangled with his and her other knee rose over his waist as he surged against her, forcing her down. He gripped her dark hair with one paw, leaving her throat exposed.

Belle gasped as the beast pressed his mouth against it, sure he would lay it open with one bite. But that bite never came. Instead he growled as he breathed, inhaling great, greedy, gulps of her scent.

Fear, anticipation of the bite and exhilaration when he didn't hurt her all left Belle's head spinning. She wrapped her arms around the beast and hung on, afraid to move.

Her fear anchored him, jolting him back to his senses, but her giddy excitement made it nearly impossible not to wrench her skirt up to see what he was missing out on. With a heroic force of will, he managed to pull himself back together. He stopped growling, but continued to rumble, his chest vibrating against her body.

She didn't budge. Her throat lay bare against his lips and he nuzzled into it. Belle gasped, a sharp intake that made him smile.

Just one little taste ... His instincts demanded it. Craved it. He flicked his tongue out, barely teasing her sensitive skin. Belle jumped in response, her fists tightening in his fur almost imperceptibly.

So he did it again, this time pressing his lips against her as well. Kissing his way along the column of her throat, he let his lips linger along her jaw, then finally pulled away.

"What," her voice caught, and she cleared her throat a little. "What was that?" She let go of his fur.

"I'm sorry for scaring you," he replied, releasing her hair. She barely moved except to lower her chin, looking straight up at him. Questions filled her gaze.

He flashed his teeth in frustration. She flinched and he pulled back, getting off of the bed. Off of her.

Belle shoved her skirt down as she scrambled to sit up.

"Here. Let me help you." He held out a paw.

Avoiding it, she scooted back against the pillows and drew a blanket across her lap. She busied herself by gathering her hair off of her neck and winding it into a bun atop her crown.

"Please hand me that ribbon." She nodded toward the small end table by the settee.

The beast's eyebrows came together as he curled his fingers, then dropped his paw to his side. He stalked over and grabbed the ribbon, then dropped it in her lap.

It twisted through the air as it fluttered down to the blanket. Belle quickly grabbed it and wrapped it around her hair, securing the bun in place.

"Can you please get Mrs. Ambly? I find that my ankle won't stop throbbing."

Dismissing me already? I don't think so, Beast thought. He stood beside the bed, unmoving.

"Let me see it."

Belle whipped her head around to glare at him. "No."

His ears went flat. "Why not?"

She raised her eyebrows, rocking back a little in disbelief. "Surely you're joking. It's not proper, and you just ... "

He didn't move, waiting for her to continue.

"Well, you just tried to maul me," she muttered.

He laughed.

"That is not how a gentleman acts, and I don't wish to let you do it again."

"You didn't *let me* do anything," he growled. The underlying threat was evident.

"I know." She nodded. "That's exactly what I mean. I didn't agree to that, and I don't want to put myself in a position for it to happen again. So please get Mrs. Ambly, if you don't mind."

He leaned closer, growling a bit. "I don't want to go get her. I want to stay here, and you can't do anything about it."

She flinched, leaning back against the pillows. A fresh wave of anxiety and fear exuded from her pores, pulling the beast up short.

What am I doing? He quieted. *She's afraid of me again. Why am I scaring her?* He looked down to see that he was leaning on the bed again, his claws digging into the mattress beside her. He released it, willing himself to relax. The claws retracted.

He sat beside the bed, pressing his forehead against it. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"What to do you mean?" Belle leaned over a little to look at him. *Mrs. Ambly did say that he's slipping further and further away the longer he's a beast.* "You can't always control yourself?" she guessed.

"Not always. I just ..." He shook his head, then snarled. "It won't happen again. I'll send someone for Mrs. Ambly. And for Phoebe." He was halfway across the room before he ended the sentence. "I'll see you at dinner."

The door slammed behind him.

A timid knock came from the door connecting her room with Papa's.

"Come in."

The door gave the slightest creak when it opened, although it, too, seemed anxious. Papa stuck his head in. "Are you all right, my love?"

Belle sighed. "I'm fine. I turned my ankle while I was walking with Phoebe, though, and it appears to have gotten the better of me."

Papa shuffled over to perch on the edge of the bed, glancing to the door and back again as he came. Mrs. Ambly's tea cart rolled along behind him and Belle smiled a little.

"I meant with the beast." He fingered the rips left behind in her bedding. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

She blushed as she shook her head. "No, no, nothing of the sort. Everything is fine, Papa."

"I'm sure it is, dear. Would you like some tea?" Mrs. Ambly asked. "I suppose you'll need something for your ankle as well."

"Yes, please." Belle's eyes twinkled as she smiled broadly at the two of them. "And what were you doing in there with my papa?"

The beast roared from the other end of the castle. Everyone ducked instinctively, even the little metal teapot.

"Why is he so angry all the time?" Belle wondered aloud.

"It's very difficult for him," Mrs. Ambly said with a sigh. "More and more as time goes on." She turned back to Belle. "What happened while he was in here? We heard bits and pieces, but I need to know everything."

Belle blushed furiously. "Oh, um, it was nothing."

Mrs. Ambly raised an eyebrow. Belle was suddenly struck by the image of a little, round, old lady tapping her foot with impatience, and she grinned.

"He sounded upset when he left, my dear," Papa chimed in.

Belle looked away from them as she pulled on the loose threads dangling from the holes in her mattress. Mrs. Ambly gasped when she noticed the rips.

"I was out walking with Phoebe and he jumped at us from the wall. She bolted and caught me off balance. I rolled my ankle and he brought me back inside, then offered to look at it for me." Belle paused. "But something came over him, and he pounced on me instead."

"Did he hurt you?" Papa demanded.

"No. I thought he was going to, but he didn't." Belle left out the licking, and kissing. Again. "Then he got angry because he had frightened me, and left."

"Ahh." Mrs. Ambly's knowing gaze flicked to Belle's hair, the light pink marks on her delicate throat, her dress hem peeking out from under the blanket near her thighs and the claw marks in the mattress.

"The master used to be very different, Miss. He was very charming. All of the ladies loved his attention, if you know what I mean."

Belle stared at her blankly. Papa, on the other hand, glared at the teapot.

"Do you mean that he was a rake?" he demanded. "And you want me to leave my innocent daughter alone with him?"

"Posh. I don't believe he would hurt her, and as for the other, don't be ridiculous. He isn't even human anymore. But let's just say that several of the maids enjoyed the stable lofts with him at one time or another, before all of this nonsense befell us."

Belle wrinkled her nose in annoyance. "Well, I wouldn't be interested even if he were human. He didn't really give me a choice about the matter, and I don't see the point if you're not in love."

Mrs. Ambly snickered, then stifled it. "Exactly, Miss. Love should have a lot to do with it. But it doesn't always, for a man."

"Hey, now!"

"For some men it does, like your honorable papa here," Mrs. Ambly said in a soothing tone. Then she winked. "But surely you know that, already? At your age?"

Belle just stared at her.

"Hasn't a man ever kissed you without being in love?" Mrs. Ambly looked her up and down. "But then I suppose most of the men in your village try to convince you that they are."

Belle rolled her eyes. "Of course they have. I'm too blasted pretty to be able to avoid it."

Papa looked up in surprise. "What now?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Ambly laughed at Belle's candor. The girl scowled back.

"Then I suppose you already know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"I've tried not to, but like I said, it's difficult to avoid with a face like this. Once I realized how much attention it gets me, I started to read more, and just try to ignore them in general. Then I found that most men don't like a clever woman, so I've kept at it. Plus I have Phoebe and our other animals to keep me busy, not to mention Papa and the house to take care of. I have a sister too, but she's with our aunt, learning to bake. And I used to have Henri, but he died."

"Who is Henri?"

Papa chortled. "Her dog. She found a half-wild mongrel pup trying to eat our chickens and insisted on keeping him when she was little more than a pup herself. I was against it in the beginning, of course, but he became a fierce protector. Even bit one of the local huntsmen one day."

"He keeps me from being bothered much. Or he did, anyway. He died a few months ago." Belle looked away. Sadness flitted across her face. *I wish he was still alive, and could come live here with me. He would keep me safe.*

"There, there, my dear," Papa consoled. "I'm sure you'll find another half-wild little scrap to take in again soon."

"If you haven't already," Mrs. Ambly murmured for Belle's ears alone.

Belle only looked away.

"Anyway, if the master tends to be a little, um, *forward* with you, that's why. It's simply how he's always been with young ladies. How he was

taught to be."

"Yes, well. I'm sure he's old enough to have outgrown such behavior. He should be more respectful."

"Oh, they never truly outgrow it, my dear," Mrs. Ambly said with a laugh. "Even when they are humans. Try to rest now, and I'm sure everything will seem better soon."

CHAPTER 5

The beast roared, giving voice to his frustration and anger. *Why do I keep scaring her?*

He threw his hands up, flipping the table before him. It cracked down the middle with a loud *snap*. It didn't help.

His frustration grew. He hurled half of the table against the wall, then picked the other half up by the legs and swung it against a corner. It splintered, raining down around him in pieces. He grinned wolfishly, delighting in the destruction.

Beast snatched up a long-forgotten goblet and hurled it across the room. It hit the wall near the table and exploded, nearly disintegrating under the force with which it struck.

She will never accept me like this! A matching plate followed the goblet. *I'm nothing but a monster. I shouldn't press her, it will only scare her away.* A small statue flew against the wall next.

So why can't I stay away from her? He threw his head back and roared again, long and loud. Beyond frustrated, he crossed the room and leaped over the balustrade. Landing on all fours in the garden, he took off, sailing over the wall and into the forest beyond.

He ran blindly at first, following nothing but his rage and frustrated desires. After several dozen miles he slowed, and realized that he had been unconsciously running laps around the outer perimeter of the estate.

Belle's face drifted into his mind's eye. He recalled how she had given his ire right back to him, defending herself with her hands on her hips. How she had scowled in his face and refused to back down when most men would have cowered in fear.

I need to stop getting so angry or she's going to leave, prisoner or not. Of course, there are always ways to redirect her passion, a tiny voice from his old days whispered. *Ways to see if her cheeks blush as much with pleasure as they do with anger. Ways to make her scream in delight.*

Beast growled at the little voice, willing it back to silence, but the damage was already done. He imagined them back in her bed, her legs around his human head as he pushed the hem of her dress up, licking the insides of her thighs before reaching her center.

He imagined her twisting her hips under his tongue, forcing him to hold her down so that he could finish. Her screams when she finally gave in and climaxed for him, shuddering in her release. He wanted to make her come against his mouth just so he could crawl up her body, licking and biting his way to her breasts, then her mouth to kiss her senseless while he sank into her wet heat.

He imagined her nails against his back, scratching his skin and leaving marks while he pounded into her. *Too bad that will never happen. Her nails would never make it through this fur.*

Beast looked down at his paws thundering across the ground and again cursed that damned enchantress for putting him in this state. It was wholly unjustified.

How could he have have known that dratted girl was *really* in love with him, or that she would fall pregnant? He'd always been so careful about not siring any children, and the idea that someone loved him instead of his title and wealth was so laughable that it hadn't even crossed his mind.

The idea that romantic love even *existed* was foolhardy to him. Marriages were contracts, arranged to best suit both parties. Especially at his rank. To have thought that he would fall in love with her and marry her, even for the sake of a babe that she couldn't prove was real just two weeks after they'd fucked, was completely irrational.

He'd liked her well enough, and supposed he would have at least kept her as a consort if the babe truly existed. But only two weeks? The castle physician had told him that it was almost impossible to know so early, and to wait for confirmation, but to accept that it might not even be his. He would be quite a catch for an unwed girl who found herself in a compromising position.

But they would never know for sure. She'd called upon a fairy and told her side of the story when he refused to immediately marry her. Then she

drowned in the lake within a day. There was no telling if it was an accident, she did it on purpose or if it was the price demanded by the enchantress that heard the story from those meddlesome fairies.

In any case, the enchantress had come after him and saddled him, and his entire family, with this damned curse.

And it will never be broken. Who even believes in love anymore, much less could fall in love with a beast like me? It's impossible.

Rage, and helplessness, threatened to swallow him whole. And so he ran, from Belle, his family in the garden, the enchanted servants, and the beast that he had become.

Belle awoke later in the afternoon. She stretched in the large bed, reveling in the smooth glide of sheets against her bare skin. She had taken off her dress after Papa and Mrs. Ambly left the room, leaving it to dry before the fire while she slept.

Slipping from the covers, she wrapped the throw blanket from the settee around her shoulders and crossed to the window seat.

At least the snow has stopped. Everything is so very white and still. Birds didn't even fly by to interrupt the scene. The sky had cleared to a beautiful shade of blue.

Maybe we can go home tomorrow! She almost danced in her excitement.

The door to the hallway opened without warning.

"Don't come in!" Belle shouted. She whirled to see who it was, clutching the blanket tightly around her naked body.

A candelabra stood in the doorway, his back to the room.

"Just a little farther," he said to someone in the hall. "We are almost there. 'Ello, mademoiselle, I have come to bring you a new wardrobe - " Etienne said as he turned around. A large piece of furniture was being shoved in from the hallway.

"Get out!"

"Oh! My sincerest apologies! I had no idea!" He quickly hustled out, but couldn't close the door behind him. A huge armoire blocked its path, sticking halfway into the room.

"Great," Belle muttered. She hobbled to the fireplace and snatched her dress from the hearth just as the beast passed her door.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, peering around the armoire. He saw Belle before the fire, wrapped in nothing but the blanket, her dress in her hands. The firelight easily found its way through the fabric, outlining every inch of her before his gaze.

"I don't know. A candlestick came in with that thing, and then ran away when he saw that I'm not exactly fit for company right now. He knocked, but I suppose he must not have heard me say not to come in. And now the door won't close so I can get dressed."

The beast just stared at her, his mouth suddenly dry.

"I don't suppose you could be a gentleman and move it, could you?"

I'm going to rip Etienne apart for this. Maybe his next vessel will be something more appropriate to his meddlesome nature. Beast nodded, then vaulted over the armoire. He landed easily on his back legs and grinned when Belle gasped. Snow flurries drifted to the floor beside him.

"You've seen me jump over the wall before," he reminded her.

"Only going away from me, and of course when you nearly landed on me earlier today. I wasn't really paying attention then, though. More like trying not to die of a heart attack."

"I'm sorry for scaring you." He shoved the heavy armoire out into the hall, then looked around. "I suppose I should have pushed it into the room, instead of out."

"That's all right. Just wait out there while I get dressed and you can bring it back in once I'm decent."

He gave another quick, sidelong glance at her form in front of the fire. His body hardened at the sight and he nearly growled in frustration.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just tell me when you're ready." He shut the door behind him.

She dropped the blanket as soon as the door closed and hurriedly put on her dress. *At least I'm presentable now.*

"Come in."

Beast opened the door a crack. "Are you ready?" Snow was stuck to his fur.

She smiled a little at his caution, totally at odds with the beast that nearly had her throat between his teeth a few hours ago.

"Yes."

He opened the door wide and shoved the armoire through almost negligently. Positioning it against the wall where the old one went, he stood back to let her see.

"What do you think?"

She tilted her head, studying him. "It looks nice enough. But why replace it now? You just broke the other one yesterday."

He dropped his head a little, almost sheepish. "I wanted to make sure you had something to put your clothes in. I'm sorry that I destroyed the other one. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Yes, you did. Belle didn't say the words aloud, but they were there nonetheless. "I don't have any clothes, other than this," she replied after an awkward moment.

He opened the armoire, revealing dresses, shoes, hats and a cloak. "I asked some of my staff to take care of it for you. Since you didn't have a warm cloak or boots."

Gaping at the display, Belle slowly crossed the room. Dresses made of silk, satin and brocade hung gracefully from the pole and shoes sat on a rack in the bottom. Fur-lined boots, walking shoes, slippers and riding boots all looked like they were her size.

"But how - how did you know what would fit me?"

He reached in and pulled out the boots, indicating that she should try them on. "My valet has an eye for these things. Between him and Mrs. Ambly, I don't think anything would dare to not fit."

Belle dropped the boot she was fingering. "Do you mean to tell me that even the clothes are alive?" she whispered, aghast.

Beast threw back his head and laughed. "No, of course not. Nothing in your room or the one next door is alive."

Sighing in relief, Belle hauled several pairs of shoes to the settee. The fur-lined boots went on first and she wiggled her toes in them with delight. "They're perfect!"

"Good. Now come here."

He held out a long green cloak. Brown fur trim accented the hood, reminding her of the forest in summer. "It's beautiful. I couldn't possibly accept this."

"Why not?" he asked. "You need it."

"Is that what this is? Charity?"

"Of course not. It's a gift."

"Why?" she pressed. "A few hours ago you were accusing me of running away and abandoning my father. Then you pounced on me. Now you're giving me beautiful clothes to make up for it?" She shook her head. "It doesn't make any sense, Beast."

He dropped back to all fours as his ears went back. "I just wanted you to be comfortable. If you don't like them, then I'll have someone take it back out."

"It's not that at all. I just want to know why." She held her hand out to him.

He stared at it for a moment, then slowly drew near. He rose back to his hind feet at the last minute, staring down at her as a man would. Finally he took her hand and pulled her up.

"I just want you to be comfortable," he repeated. "And I apologize for how I treated you earlier. I'll try to be more of a gentleman from now on. It's sometimes difficult for me to remember how I should be behaving. I'm your host, not some starving monster. No matter how I look."

The corners of her mouth tilted slightly. She kept her hand on his arm as they walked back to the armoire, wearing the new boots as she leaned on his arm for support.

"How is your ankle?"

"Better, thank you. I think resting it helped. Did anyone find Phoebe?"

He nodded. "She's back in her stable now."

"Thank you." Belle paused to glance at the window. "It looks like the storm has cleared, so I should be able to take Papa home tomorrow. Is there a wagon or cart that we may borrow to get home?"

Beast didn't immediately answer as his brows drew together.

"I can bring it back next Tuesday," she hastily reassured him. "We won't keep it for long. I just don't think that Phoebe will like carrying both of us all the way home."

"So you'll use a cart but not clothes? That doesn't make any sense."

She flushed. "I am only asking to borrow a cart to get my ailing father home. Not luxurious clothes that you want me to wear only because you think mine are somehow lacking. There's a big difference. The cart I need, the clothes are just a frivolous luxury."

"Keeping yourself warm in the snow isn't a luxury. I'm not stupid, Belle. What's the real reason that you don't want them?"

Glancing away, she bit her bottom lip. "I don't want to owe you anything else. I'm already going to be working to pay off my father's debt to you, and the debts from us staying so long. I don't want to have to owe you any more, especially when I don't know what you expect me to do in return."

Scoffing, the beast left her at the armoire and turned to leave, his gaze suddenly frosty. "You'll be my prisoner forever regardless of the clothes. That was the deal. So why not take them and stop worrying about it?"

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving her staring at it in despair.

"Forever ..." she whispered. Tears threatened to overwhelm her and she tilted her head back, sniffling and blinking to keep them at bay. She even waved her hand in front of her face, trying not to cry.

It didn't work. Belle stumbled to the bed and clutched a pillow, sobbing into it.

"Forever. He wants me to be his prisoner here forever." Any dreams she had of eventually finding a husband, having a family, taking care of Papa and reuniting with her sister felt like they were slipping away. "I won't even be able to have children, unless I find a husband willing to come here and the beast doesn't eat him. It's not fair! He said he would eventually free Papa, so why do I have to stay forever?"

Finally crying herself out, Belle went back to the window seat. Snow fell softly on the other side of the glass and she watched for a long time after the beast had left.

~

Hours later, someone knocked on her door. She didn't answer.

Dinnertime came and went, but Belle stayed at the window, uninterested.

"Miss? Are you coming to dinner?" someone asked through the door.

"I'm not hungry," Belle called back. She heard a slight scuffle in the hallway.

"Are you sure, Miss? The master said that you would be joining him."

Arrogant ass. Of course he assumed that I would join him. "Tell him that I am unable to make it this evening."

She got up and locked the hallway door, then went to check on Papa. She found him asleep in bed, peppermint paste on his chest and a tray on the nightstand. Lifting the lid, Belle found several bread crusts and a little soup broth in the bottom of a bowl.

Guilt flashed through her and she smoothed back his wispy hair. His head was cool and she sighed with relief. *His fever is broken.*

"I'm sorry that I haven't spent more time with you today," she murmured. "I didn't mean to leave you all alone while I felt sorry for myself." She kissed his forehead. "I'll do better tomorrow, I promise."

Someone banged on the door in her room. She hurried back in to hear, "But, Master, I don't think this will help, you see-"

"She said she would have dinner with me!" the beast growled back. He banged on the door again. "Belle!"

"I already told the girl you sent that I'm not hungry!" she called back.

"Why not?!"

"Because I don't feel like eating!"

He roared as he shook the door. "Let me in, Belle!"

"I'd rather not. I'm not dressed to receive anyone right now," she lied.

He hit the door once more, rattling it in its frame. "Fine!" he bellowed. "Then just starve!"

He stomped away.

"If she doesn't eat with me, then she doesn't eat at all!" he said to someone in the hallway, a little way from her door. "Keep watch on her door. All night if you have to."

Belle rolled her eyes. "I'll be here *forever*, so what's one dinner here or there?" she muttered, tempted to go out and ask him that very question. Sadness rolled through her at the thought and she went back to the window seat instead.

*We **could** just run, I suppose. Sell the animals and go to Mont Clair to stay with Daphne.*

She brightened at that possibility. *Maybe we can escape. But I don't think I would ever stop looking over my shoulder. Still, isn't that better than being a prisoner?*

Belle looked around. The posh, graceful room was warm and inviting, and the satin dresses gleamed in the firelight. *Maybe it's not such a bad prison, on second thought. It all depends on what the beast wants me to do to work off the debts. I'll decide what to do after my first day of real work.*

Satisfied with her decision, Belle turned back to the window. Darkness had swallowed most of the view, but the stars glistened like tiny diamonds in the sky. The moon illuminated the snow, reflecting off of it to create a surreal landscape, untouched by any living creature.

Belle sat there a moment longer, then rose and made her way to the bed. Sleep was a long time coming, but eventually she closed her eyes for the night.

Belle awoke the next morning to find another plate of sticky buns and a jug of hot chocolate on a tea table near the roaring fire. She poured herself a cup before flicking through the new dresses hanging in her wardrobe, intent on finding something warm enough to travel in.

If I'm already going to be borrowing the cart, there's no point in refusing his hospitality when I can just bring back a few borrowed clothes too, she mused. *It's better than freezing to death on the way home, regardless.*

Belle chose a light blue woolen dress with navy trim, and pulled on the fur-lined boots as well. She tossed a few more dresses on the bed to take home with her, then grabbed her plate, refilled her cup, and made her way to her father's door.

"Good morning, Papa," she called. "Are you up?"

He said something from the other side, but she couldn't tell what. Pushing open the door, Belle giggled to find him standing in a pair of new trousers and crisp, white shirt, turning this way and that before his window.

"What on earth are you doing?"

He grinned and held his arms out to his sides. "I'm trying to see my reflection, my dear. Don't I look grand? And you, too."

"Yes, you look wonderful. Like you're feeling much better." She took a sip of chocolate. "Where did you get these clothes?"

Papa gestured to an armoire in the corner that Belle didn't recall seeing before. "I just woke up and it was there. Full of clothes, you know, with a note on the front that said I'm welcome to use whatever I'd like, free of

charge." He gave a little laugh. "I suppose the beast knew I wouldn't touch them otherwise - wouldn't want the sugar bowl fiasco to happen all over again."

Belle nodded. *The beast gave Papa clothes? First the stable for Phoebe, now this? But why?*

"Have you tried these?" Papa asked, holding a sticky bun up for inspection. "They smell delicious."

"I had some yesterday, while you were still abed. They're wonderful. We should go thank the cook before we leave."

"Oh, are we going home today?"

Belle glanced out the window, then nodded. "It looks like the snow is melting, and there isn't a cloud in the sky. We should leave this morning and get an early start. I don't know how long it will take us to get home."

"Oh." Disappointment laced her father's voice.

"Surely you don't wish to stay?" Belle asked, incredulous. "Papa, he was going to keep you as his prisoner."

Papa shrugged. "I know. But you said that's all worked out now, and I'm not sure I'm well enough to make the trip yet." He popped a sticky bun into his mouth. "Besides, what could be the harm in staying a few more days?"

Belle eyed him with suspicion as she crossed her arms. "Is this about Mrs. Ambly?"

His eyes went round he choked on the pastry. Belle rushed over to him and pounded his back while he coughed.

"Of course not! Why would you think that?" he sputtered.

"Papa, don't try to deceive me," she warned. "I know you two have a flirtation going."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

She smirked. "Then why was she in your room last night?"

He looked around quickly, as though checking to make sure she wasn't in there again. "No reason. She merely brought me some tea and we heard the beast through the door."

"Right ..." sarcasm laced Belle's voice, but Papa didn't reply. Rolling her eyes, she finally continued, "We need to leave soon if we want to make it home by this evening. Gather up the clothes that you wish to take and I'll go check on the cart."

"Are you sure, my dear? I don't want to risk taking anything after what happened with the sugar bowl." He picked at the shirt cuff, then moved to take it off. "Best to just leave them all here, I think."

"I spoke with the beast about it and he said we are welcome to them. They are gifts."

Papa looked doubtful. "Still ..." he trailed off, uncertain.

Crossing the room, Belle pulled a fine, heavy cloak from the armoire in his room and pressed it into Papa's hands. "You'll need this to make it home without getting sick again. It's all right, I promise."

If I'm already going to be here forever, I may as well make sure Papa gets something good out of it. Fine clothes are the least that wretched beast could do.

"I'm going to find James and see about getting Phoebe ready to go. Hopefully we can be on our way within the hour."

"If you insist," he replied with a small sigh.

Belle went into the hallway, closing the door behind her with a decisive *click*. Her new dress swished around her, much fuller and heavier than the blue one she had left home in a few days ago. She smiled, albeit with a glimmer of sadness. *I'm paying enough for it that I might as well enjoy it, I suppose.*

She found Mrs. Ambly and told her of their plans, then requested more paper for another letter. James was quick about hooking Phoebe to the cart that had already been pulled around, and Belle was back on her way to her room before long.

Sitting by the fire, she chewed her lip as she thought. *Well, what do I write to him this time? There's no use putting it off. I definitely don't want to say goodbye in person, but it would be rude not to give some sort of farewell.* She sighed.

Sir,

Thank you for your hospitality while Papa and I have been here. We both appreciate your invitation to stay, as well as the hot meals and new clothes during our time of need. I will return next Tuesday, as we agreed, to render aid in whatever way I can to pay off Papa's debt to you. I will bring the cart back then, as well.

Thank you again,

Belle

Belle reread the letter, then blew on it. *Invitation to stay, ha. Like I'm being* ***invited*** *to come back for the rest of my life.* She shook her head, trying not to think about it. *I'm going home now, it wouldn't do any good to start crying about it again. Besides, Papa still thinks everything will be all right.*

Gathering her meager belongings and the new cloak and boots, Belle made her way to Papa's room.

"Are you ready to go?"

His shoulders slumped as he looked around. "I suppose so."

"Has Mrs. Ambly been by to say goodbye?"

Papa nodded. "She said I should come back to visit."

"That might be all right. I'll ask the beast about it next time I'm here, if you would like."

"Isn't he going to see us off?"

She shrugged delicately. "I wrote him a letter expressing our gratitude for his hospitality. I don't see why he would come to say goodbye. It's not like we're friends with him."

"I suppose that's true."

They stopped by the kitchen before making their way outside to say goodbye to Cookie and the other staff. Mrs. Ambly saw them out.

"Be careful on your way back, and we will see you in a few days," she said.

"Oh, I'm not coming back until next Tuesday," Belle corrected her.

"Oh," she cast a confused look back at the door. "But the master said you would be back this week."

Belle shook her head. "It would be silly to go all the way home, just to stay for two days and then ride all the way back. That would mean that I would have to stay here Monday night, work on who knows what on Tuesday, stay another night and ride home all day Wednesday. I couldn't possibly leave Papa for three whole days just after we've gotten back home. He needs me to look after him until he's better."

"I suppose that's true," Mrs. Ambly worried. "But the master will be very upset."

"Just tell him that I'll be back next Tuesday instead, and I'm sure he won't even notice. It'll be fine."

"Well, if you insist," the housekeeper replied slowly. "I think you would be surprised by what the master notices." She looked at Belle for a long, thoughtful moment. "You *are* coming back, aren't you?"

Belle didn't answer immediately. *He will only chase us down if I don't, and then he would never trust me again. And who knows what would happen to Papa if Beast came looking for me in the village? Papa would either have a heart attack, or be blamed for Beast's presence and called a witch. I* ***have*** *to come back so that doesn't happen.*

"I know it's hard to imagine, but he needs you, Belle. Who else would ever give him a chance to finally be himself again?"

"Why does it have to be me?" she whispered in despair.

"Because you're the only one who can, dear. You're not afraid of him. You can connect with him and he already goes out of his way to see you. I don't think he gave your sweet Papa more than a moment's attention while he was here, or anyone else that has wandered onto the estate before. Not that it's happened in years. But you - you make him laugh. You make him *think.* There's a reason that your Papa found us at his time of need, and you did as well. I just know it."

Is she right? Is it possible? Her first meeting with Henri came to mind. Just a little scrap of fur, he had growled, snapped and barked loud enough for ten mongrels twice his size. But eventually, he calmed. He let her feed him, bathe him, take care of him. And in return, he took care of her, becoming her best friend in the whole world. Tears filled her eyes at the thought of what would have happened if she'd turned him away instead of taking him in.

But this creature isn't Henri. He's not a harmless pup, just looking for a meal and a warm bed. He could be dangerous... But he did save us. Belle finally nodded.

Mrs. Ambly beamed. "Be careful on your trip home, dear. I promise you won't regret this."

Belle hugged her, gave her the letter and soon they were on their way. The trip home was long, and they arrived back home near dusk. Exhausted, Belle helped her father inside, put away Phoebe and the cart, and fell into bed. She dreamed of the castle, its enchanted occupants and an unknown family staring at her from the gardens, still as statues.

~

"Ten days? But she promised she would be here on Tuesday!" the beast roared.

Mrs. Ambly tried to reason with him. "But, Master, her poor father is still ill. It wouldn't make any sense to make the long journey home, only stay a few days, then leave him alone for three more days while she came back. Maybe if you could try to be a little more understanding, she would be more open to the idea of staying."

"She will stay with us," he growled. "She's already agreed to move here as my prisoner in three weeks."

"As your prisoner?" Mrs. Ambly gasped. "That's no way to make her fall in love with you!"

"Well, she wouldn't stay any other way!"

"Come, now. I'm sure we can think of something. Offer her a job, or the like."

"A job?" He raised one eyebrow.

"Maybe something to do with animals, since she likes them so much."

He met her suggestion with a droll stare. "Animals. That we have none of, because they are all terrified of me."

"Ah, yes. Well, I'm sure we can figure something out. We'll just have to think about it. " She hopped back up onto her tea cart. "In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to try to make yourself a little more presentable. Maybe a trim around the edges, as it were."

He bared his teeth. She ignored him.

"Maybe a little more civilization is what we all need around here," she said.

"It couldn't hurt," Etienne agreed. "Maybe a bath, a haircut and some new clothes to make you feel a bit more like the man you used to be, eh?"

"Not you, too," Beast grumbled.

"That's the spirit," Mrs. Ambly agreed, egging Etienne on. "Some new clothes would be just the thing. I'll have Colette start right away." She rolled toward the door. "Come now, we have lots to do before Belle returns."

Etienne followed her out, agreeing to her various schemes along the way.

"Wonderful," Beast muttered. "Like any of this will do any good. She'll never see me as anything but a beast."

Enjoy part 1 of *Beauty and the Beast,* and want more? Here's a sneak peak of their first kiss in book 2, *Captive*!

The scene… Beast and Belle have just finished their first dinner together, and are chatting over strawberries with whipped cream for dessert, and of course, wine. Inhibitions are lowered and she's already in his lap due to wardrobe malfunctions, so what else is a girl to do but relax and enjoy his company?

"You mean you're not going to chastise me for choosing a novel as my favorite? Instead of a cookbook or something else?" She rolled her eyes as she grabbed another berry. "A novel is just made up, you know."

"I have a cook." *What is she talking about?* He tried to focus on the conversation again, but she ran her finger through the whipped cream and licked it once more. Beast immediately imagined her licking it off of his cock instead, unable to help himself. No matter how hard he tried.

She smiled at him, oblivious to the battle raging in his head.

"So, I never have to cook while I'm here? Ever? I have to admit, it's not really something that I enjoy."

"You can do whatever you want, as long as it's with me," he nearly growled back.

Belle smiled as she leaned against him. "I'm glad to hear that. Can we go see the library now?"

Go see the library? I can't even get out of this chair. "Not right now. We can visit in the morning."

Her full lower lip protruded ever so slightly as she pouted. "But you just said-"

"I don't want you to ruin the surprise," he replied, desperate for anything that would keep her there. On him. "We'll see it first thing in the morning. I promise."

"But I'm not going to be able to sleep, I'm so excited about it. Like I told you earlier, once I start thinking about something, it's very difficult

for me to stop."

Perfect. "Oh, really?" His voice dropped an octave. "Let's give you something else to think about then. Close your eyes."

He leaned down again as she obeyed, her inhibitions loosened up by the wine. His breath was warm as it fanned across her cheek just before his lips touched the corner of her mouth.

She jumped, startled, before turning her face toward his. *What is he-*

He kissed her. His lips, softer than she would have imagined, pressed against hers for a moment before she relaxed.

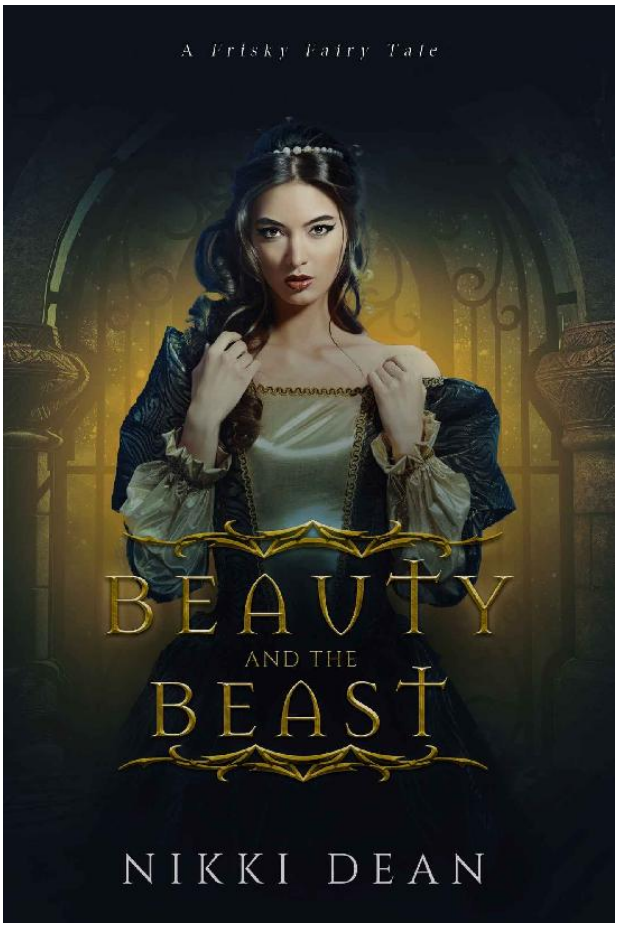
Who would have thought my first real kiss would be like this? she thought. *What am I supposed to do again? What does the princess always do when she kisses her knight?* His lips moved against hers and she puckered slightly, innocently pressing against him. He groaned at her acceptance. Belle smiled and he took advantage, flicking his tongue into her mouth a little bit at a time.

Caught off guard, Belle touched it with hers. He purred, vibrating against her and she rubbed against him, encouraged. Their tongues danced together for several moments before Beast lifted his head, breaking the kiss.

His hands dug into her hips as he moved on to kiss her jaw lightly, his lips a mere flutter against the sensitive skin. She shivered and he pulled her closer on his lap, growling with approval. The rumbling of his chest caused a delightful friction between them, leaving tingles in its wake.

I don't remember reading about this in any of my novels.

Keep reading for Chapter 1!


A Frisky Fairy Tale
BEAUTY
AND THE
BEAST
NIKKI DEAN

CAPTIVE: CHAPTER 1

Why won't he just go away, and leave me alone? Belle ducked back behind the bread case, hiding as Gustav and Francois laughed together at the fruit stand nearby. Blowing a strand of hair from her face, she looked down at the baguette she was holding.

I wish I had just paid for this and left, instead of looking around. Her belly growled, and she was tempted to take a bite right then and there.

"So, you'll let me know if she stops by," Gustav instructed.

Belle rolled her eyes in disgust. *Anyone else would have at least attempted to make it sound like a request, but I doubt it even crossed his mind, the arrogant ass.*

The baker's son poked her in the ribs, eliciting a startled gasp. Belle clapped her hand over her mouth and glared at the boy, who grinned back unrepentantly.

"Whatcha doing, Miss Belle?" he asked, crouching down beside her.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she hissed back.

"Hiding from Gustav." He gave another wicked grin and picked up a pebble.

"Don't you dare!" She tried to swat it out of his hand as he pulled it back, as though he were going to throw it at Gustav's back.

"It'll cost you."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you want?"

"A kiss."

"Absolutely not!"

He stood, squinting in the early morning light as he took aim.

"Fine, fine! Just don't do it!" she ordered. The ten-year-old sank back to his haunches and offered up his cheek for the expected payment.

Belle sighed and gave him a quick peck. "All right, scamp. Now go and tell them that you saw me crossing the bridge to Mont Clair, and that I'm not expected back until sundown." She stood, tucking the bread into her basket. "Oh, and I'm taking this. I expect you to tell your father that it's paid for, if he asks," she teased.

The little boy gave her an indignant glare, but hurried off anyway. Belle turned and went into the baker's shop. His wife stood at the counter, and gave Belle a welcoming smile.

"Just the bread today, Adelynn," Belle said, handing a coin over.

"Did you see Tristian? He's been asking about you, wondering when you'd be by again," Adelynn asked as she tucked the coin into the pocket beneath her apron.

Nodding, Belle replied, "Indeed. He even swindled a kiss out of me in exchange for telling Gustav and Francois that he saw me heading over the bridge."

Adelynn laughed. "That boy. He's always up to something. Is Gustav still bothering you?"

"I don't think he will ever stop. I wish he'd just get married already."

"I think he plans to."

"Oh, really?" Belle asked, a smile flooding her face. "That would be wonderful. I hope you're right."

"Just watch out for yourself," Adelynn warned. "Getting married or not, he's still got an eye on you."

"I will," Belle promised as she headed back out to the street. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Stopping by several more shops, Belle bought soap, rice, fruit and meat. Finally, she came to her real destination - the bookstore.

A bell tinkled overhead as she entered. The heavy scent of leather, and lighter almost vanilla-like scents of paper and ink, surrounded her. Belle took a deep breath, almost tasting it.

This is what happiness smells like. She relaxed in the doorway, the tension flowing from her body.

"Ahh, Belle. I've saved you a new book," Antoine, the shopkeeper, greeted her. "It's only just arrived, and I knew that you would want to read it." He held out a leather-bound volume.

Cooing with delight, Belle entered and gently took it from his hands. She closed her eyes for the briefest moment. *Please, please, please don't be another almanac about the weather.*

It wasn't. A beautiful color picture of a castle graced the page, and the first few sentences proved to be about a princess.

She could have shouted with glee. "A novel! You've ordered me a novel!" she exclaimed, hugging the book to her chest. "How can I ever thank you?"

Antoine laughed and slowly hobbled around the desk to give her a hug. "I knew you would like it. You've read everything else in here, so I thought it was time you had something special of your own." She pulled out her coin purse and he waved it away. "Don't worry about that. It's a gift."

"But, why? Books are so precious."

He nodded. "I think so too, but there are many who don't see it that way. Your appreciation is payment enough. I just had a feeling that you would be needing it soon, for some reason." He chuckled to himself. "Silly, isn't it? Why would you need a novel?"

How did he know? Tears filled her eyes, threatening to overwhelm her. She sniffled, willing them back. "You don't have any idea how much this means to me. Thank you so very much, Monsieur Antoine." Impulsively, she bent and kissed his wrinkled, old forehead.

He blushed, scarlet creeping up his face to his white hairline, making him look like a funny little tomato in a hat.

"I'll treasure it always," she promised. He nodded, still red-faced.

Belle brought the book to her face and inhaled. The scents of leather and parchment filled her head again. *I can't believe it's mine. Just for me.*

"I knew you'd be here, sooner or later."

Belle gasped in surprise as she jerked her head back, startled out of her euphoria.

"What on earth were you doing?"

She blushed. Gustav laughed as he came into the small shop, crowding her against the counter. Antoine tsked from behind it.

"You know, if you like the smell of leather so much, I have several prime hides that I'm sure you would be delighted with," Gustav said in a low tone. He raised one eyebrow and pursed his lips ever so slightly.

Grimacing, Belle stepped back, toward the door. "No, thank you, Gustav. I'm afraid my papa has been ill and I need to get back home quickly."

"Why don't I walk you?"

"Thank you for the offer, but I wouldn't want you to have to wait on me. I haven't had a chance to look around yet, and I want to buy a new book."

"I know," he said, glancing toward the door, "I saw you come in. I was at the lodge. And it looks like you've already got one right there."

"I, ah, need another one. A different one."

Gustav plucked the novel from her grasp and flipped it open to the middle. "I can see why. This one doesn't even have any pictures, so how on earth will you know what you're making?"

Belle just stared at him, baffled. "What I'm making?" she repeated slowly.

Gustav tossed the novel onto the counter. Belle flinched as it landed and slid, teetering precariously on the edge. "Antoine, where are the cookbooks? It seems my lady needs a different one."

"I don't want a cookbook, Gustav," Belle retorted. "And I'm not your lady. In fact, I think I should just get this and go." She scooped up her book.

"Don't want a cookbook? Why not? And what's that, then?"

She sighed. "It's a novel."

"A novel?" he repeated. A frown furrowed his brow. "Why?"

She sighed. "Because I want to read it."

"But why? There isn't anything useful in a novel. They're just made-up stories about nothing. Why would you want to waste your time on that?"

Gustav stepped close to her, his chest nearly touching her. "If you want to hear a story, I have some that I know you would love." He paused to lick his lips.

She tried not to retch.

"All about the thrill of the chase, the sweet satisfaction when I finally catch my prey. I promise that you'll enjoy it."

Is he serious right now? Like I would want to hear about him killing defenseless animals. I wonder what would happen if he tried to chase the beast. She imagined him throwing Gustav to the ground and roaring, and she smiled.

"No, thank you," Belle said as she moved away. "Like I said, I need to get home to Papa."

"It would be no trouble," Gustav said, encouraged by her smile. "I think you secretly want to hear about it."

She frowned. "No, I don't. Now please excuse me." She tried to scoot around him to open the door.

He blocked her.

"Gustav, please move. I need to go."

"Maybe next time then, my little Beauty. I know you're interested. Your smile made that clear."

"I was thinking about something else."

He held a hand up to his chest in mock offense, but a glimmer of real anger shot through his eyes. "Something else? Was it me, instead of our conversation? I often think of you and smile."

Wary, Belle didn't immediately answer. "Something like that."

He grinned at her. "I knew it. Are you certain you don't want me to walk you home?"

She edged by him, nodding. "I'll be fine on my own."

Gustav sighed as he leaned against the counter, watching through the window as she hurried away.

"So, where has she been?" Francois sidled up to Gustav. "I heard you talking."

"With her father. He's ill."

"I thought you said they weren't home?"

Gustav glanced down at the smaller man. "It doesn't matter. They came back. She wanted to stay and listen to my hunting stories, but said her father needs her. The old bat."

"Ha ha, yeah, it would be nice if she could get away from him and pay all of her attention to you."

A pair of pretty blondes walked by as the men left the bookstore. Both of them slowed, smiling at Gustav from behind their fans. "Well, I don't want her attention all of the time," he muttered. "That would be rather... limiting."

Francois laughed.

"Aubrey, Desirae, how are you ladies this fine afternoon?"

They both stopped, waiting for him. Gustav clapped Francois on the shoulder, then left him standing beside the bookshop.

"That man. Assuming that I've got nothing better to do than listen to his trivial nonsense all afternoon," Belle muttered as she stomped back up the path to her cottage. "And assuming that all I would possibly want is a cookbook instead of a novel, because those are a waste of time. Ha. *He's* a waste of time."

Something rustled in the woods beside her path, and Belle jumped. "Hello?"

Nothing responded, or moved again.

"It must have been a bird." She continued on, never noticing the miniature doll that lay discarded beneath the trees.

Once Belle was out of sight, the doll sat up. "Books? I will have to let the master know that she likes to read," it muttered, pulling a tiny nub of a pencil and some paper from its pocket. It hurried down the path until it came to a small cottage. Belle's voice rang out from inside.

The doll nodded decisively. "Right, then. Time to find a good hiding spot."

~

The next several days passed in a blur, and Belle fell into bed exhausted each night. That didn't prevent her from tossing and turning, willing away thoughts of being kept against her will.

Why would he say that I have to stay forever? Doesn't he realize that means I'll never get married, or have children? She rolled her eyes, thinking of Gustav. *Not that there's anyone here that I* ***want*** *to marry, but you never know, someone new could move to town. Or I could leave, and go stay with Daphne. No, Papa would never make it on his own.* Tears filled her eyes, then streamed onto her pillow. *I guess she'll have to move back, or he'll have to learn to be on his own once I move to the castle.*

Belle ended up crying herself to sleep most of these nights.

One day, she woke up to find a letter sitting on the front steps.

"Who could this be from?" she wondered aloud. The front of the envelope was mysteriously blank, so she ripped it open, eager to see what was inside.

My Lady,

It was my pleasure to offer you refuge while you needed it. I look forward to seeing you again in a few days. Leave early so that you are through the forest before dusk - I do not want to have to save you and that blasted horse from the wolves again.

Beast

nnoyed, Belle quickly refolded the letter and stuffed it back into its envelope. *Refuge? Ha. He seemed to be less than thrilled at our presence, but I suppose he has a point about the wolves. I should be all right if we leave before the*

first light, and it will be faster when I come home without the cart. Belle chewed on her lip as she thought about it. *We should be fine, as long as we leave early enough, but I'm still not going this week.*

She tossed the letter onto the counter and thought about what to write back while she made breakfast. Finally she drew a thick line under his words and replied on the same piece of paper.

Beast,

I regret to inform you that my father is still too ill to be left on his own, so I will not be coming this week. I thought that I had made that clear to Mrs. Ambly when she saw us off, but I will instead come back to begin working to repay our debts <u>next</u> Tuesday. Please let me know what I will be doing, so that I can dress accordingly.

Sincerely,

Belle

Belle set it aside to let it dry, then went out to feed the chickens. Lost in thought, she stood in the center of the yard, absently tossing grain to the clucking hens.

Hopefully he writes back to give me an idea of what he's expecting me to do. The servants clean faster than I could ever hope to, so that's obviously not it. And he has a cook to prepare his food already. Maybe I could tend the gardens. It didn't look like they've been cared for in quite some time. She shrugged. *But then again, neither was the house, until we showed up. He couldn't possibly be serious about me staying forever when he has no need of me. He must have just been trying to scare me.*

Uncertainty stayed with her the rest of the day, and into the evening. She laid her letter for the beast outside of the cottage door, in the same place that she had found his that morning. *I wonder if it magically disappears.*

Opening the door a few minutes later, she found the spot empty, without any clue of who had picked the letter up. *So, I suppose the magic does extend all the way to here.*

Filing that bit of information away for later, she closed the door and went to bed.

~

She was back in the garden, but it was lush, green and beautiful. Gorgeous roses, some as large as a dinner plate, covered the castle wall before her, creeping up to wrap curious tendrils around the balustrade. French doors were thrown open behind it, and Belle could see that the room inside had been demolished - as though some kind of beast had been kept in it far too long.

"Belle! We've been waiting for you, love!"

The deep voice sounded slightly familiar, and she turned to find its owner. A handsome stone man stood in the center of a small circle of empty pedestals. A statue walked past him on the garden path, laughing beneath its stone umbrella.

He smiled at her and bowed, then took her elbow as though escorting her back inside.

"Come with us, Belle. Everyone else is inside," the statue lady said, but her lips never moved and her face remained still with its stony expression. "They can't wait to meet you."

Belle started forward, then pulled up short. "I will in a moment, but I promised to wait for him out here," she replied.

"Oh, all right then. Don't be long though! We have lots to talk about," the stone lady answered.

Belle waved them on, then turned to look at the back wall. Concern filled her, for some reason. "Where are you?" she whispered to herself.

"I'm here, Princess. Did you miss me?" Strong arms wrapped around her, engulfing her in a fur cloak.

She turned to face him, unable to contain the delight bubbling up in her chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He kissed her back for a moment, then lifted his head. Shaggy, light brown hair fell around his ears and she touched it with her fingertips before trailing them over his cheeks. He smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes," he murmured before swooping in for another kiss, this one harder than the last. She opened her mouth as he teased her lips with his tongue. He pulled her closer, sliding his hands over her back to cup her rear. One sharp tug lifted her onto her toes, pressing her belly against his erection.

It was better than any kiss she'd ever had before. He shifted again and lifted her higher to trail kisses down her throat. She wrapped her legs around

his waist and he groaned, burying his face against her neck for a moment.

"More," she demanded, pulling his hair. He chuckled, vibrating against her as he went back to kissing and licking the column of her throat. Euphoric, Belle tilted her head back, giving him full access.

"Belle! What are you doing?" Someone, a man, yelled at her. She ignored him, urging her lover to continue. He did, nibbling his way down to her collarbone.

"Belle! Look out, Belle, he's about to bite!" Gustav. It was Gustav shouting at her.

Belle opened her eyes as she leaned forward, resting her cheek against her lover's fur.

"Fur? But I thought..." She looked down.

The beast stared up at her, her legs around him while he gently kissed her skin.

"Stay with me, Belle. Promise you'll never leave me," he sighed against her chest. "Please stay."

Belle screamed.

~

She woke with a start, flailing against the sheets that had twisted around her body, imprisoning her. Breathing hard, she stumbled from the bed and ran to the window.

Moonlight streamed through it, illuminating the snowy patches that remained on the ground outside. The glass was cool to the touch and she leaned against it, then opened the pane.

Cold air flooded the room, and soon Belle was shivering in her nightgown. She stood there a moment longer, then closed the window and went back to bed.

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading the first part of my version of my favorite fairy tale, Beauty and the Beast!
I hope you enjoyed it, and look forward to hearing what you thought in a review, either on the storefront you bought it from, or Goodreads, or both if you're feeling extra nice.

Captive, Beauty and the Beast Part Two is available for sale on Amazon here .

Please join my mailing list at http://eepurl.com/cn3wqn *for information on new releases in the series. I promise not to bombard you with junk mail or sell your information under any circumstances.*

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